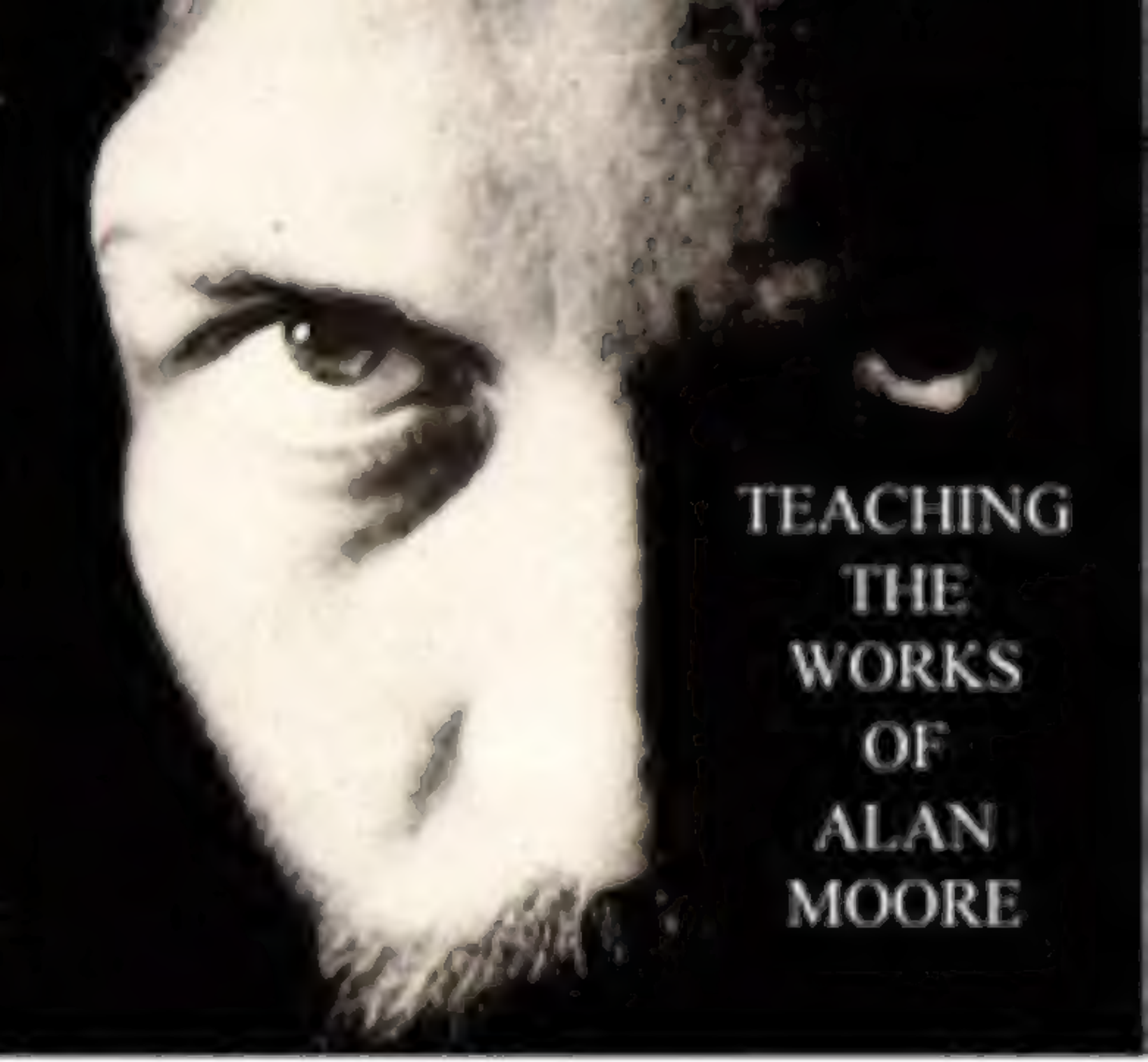

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SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Teaching the Works of Alan Moore*

Article 1

1-1-2011

Introduction: Teaching the Works of Alan Moore

James Bucky Carter Ph.D.

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Introduction to Edition 1:2: "Teaching the Works of Alan Moore"

By James Bucky Carter, Editor

After more than forty years in and out of the comics industry, Alan Moore is a writer who continues to intrigue, even after many of his most famous works have been troped and copied and parodied by others across multiple forms and genres, from super hero yarns to television series to film adaptations.

No wonder, then, that as more folks consider comics in college and k-12 curricula, that Moore's work is getting attention from educators. *Watchmen* has been a consistent choice for many a college-level course. I enjoy teaching it any chance I get and have done so in courses designed to explore trends and issues in the medium as well as in pedagogy-centric classes, like my graduate course "Teaching the Graphic Novel" and my undergraduate English 3327 course, which focuses on teaching media, visual literacy and hybrid/ multimodal texts in secondary schools. In Stephen E. Tabachnick's wonderful collection *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (2009), I have written about my experience teaching *Watchmen* to a group of freshman composition students at the University of Tennessee. *V for Vendetta* seems to be a popular college-level text as well, and with the current "Occupy" movements sweeping the globe, one wonders if young people in those pasty masks have been more influenced by Moore and his character V than by the actual Guy Fawkes.

With several books written about him or profiling his career, including a new University of Mississippi Press *Conversations* book edited by Eric L. Berlatsky (2011), Gary Spencer Millidge's *Alan Moore: Storyteller* (2011), George Khoury's *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore* (2003) and the eclectic *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (2003), and surely more on the way, scholars and comics fans have suggested Moore is a force worthy of attention. As I and others have revisited and published about the potential of comics at the k-12 level, more and more teachers seem eager to bring Moore's comics into those settings as well. Maureen Bakis, for example, who has just released *The Graphic Novel Classroom* (2011) about her experience teaching a "graphic novel curriculum" at Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield, Massachusetts, has a chapter devoted to teaching *V for Vendetta*. Allen Porter has used that text with students at Ann Harbor, Michigan's Skyline High School[1]. John C. Weaver has taught *Watchmen* to upper-classmen at Williamsport Area High School[2] in Williamsport, Pennsylvania[3]. As more teachers learn about these educators' success and examine the growing scholarship and research that suggests that graphic novels and

[1] http://graphicnovelreporter.com/content/teaching-graphic-novels-literature-op-ed
[2] http://graphicnovelreporter.com/content/who-teaches-watchmen-op-ed
[3] http://graphicnovelreporter.com/content/reteaching-watchmen-op-ed

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comics have a beneficial place in the classroom, the potential to see readings from Moore on secondary school syllabi grows.

While many of Moore's works offer potential challenges for secondary educators, in theme and content and representations of violence and sex (as I ask my pre-service teacher candidates, "Do you really think you're going to get through a reading of *Watchmen* without one blue ball joke?), and while much of his opus probably should be considered best studied at the college-level (I have fears about reading a news story in which a sixth-grade teacher decides to integrate a scene from *Lost Girls* into his or her unit of fairy tales), that Moore's comics are getting attention from a range of teachers is a further testament to his skill as a writer and intrigue as a personality.

This edition of *SANEjournal* seeks to add to the intrigue and utility of bringing the works of Alan Moore into the classroom. Appropriately, the focus is on secondary and post-secondary settings in the articles, rationales, and review herein. Northwestern University graduate student Travis White-Schwoch pairs with his mentor David Rapp to explore how reading and teaching *Watchmen* can be an exercise in building literacy and recognizing and honing skills associated with successful reading strategies. Matthew J. Smith shares reflections, syllabus, and assignments associated with a college course devoted to many of Moore's excellent and provocative texts. Stacey Kikendall has been experimenting with using *V for Vendetta* in her 200-level expository writing course at the University of New Mexico and shares reflections on that experience. Her article dovetails nicely into a rationale for teaching *V for Vendetta* at the secondary level and beyond written by Susan Spangler. John C. Weaver was kind enough to grant permission to reprint his rationale for *Watchmen* that first appeared on the CD-Rom *Rationales for Teaching Graphic Novels* (2010), and I include a rationale for teaching the first volume of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* as well. Finally, Orion Ussner Kidder reviews one of the best scholarly texts available on Moore's work and influence, Annalisa Di Liddo's 2009 release *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel.*

Enjoy. And if you happen to find yourself caught in a flux of the space-time continuum while reading, don't blame me.

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Article 2

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Comprehending comics and Graphic Novels: Watchmen as a Case for Cognition

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Comprehending Comics and Graphic Novels: *Watchmen* as a Case for Cognition

By Travis White-Schwoch and David N. Rapp
Northwestern University

Reading *Watchmen*: A cognitive perspective

In the opening sequence of *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (1986-1987), a disheveled man wanders the streets of New York, carrying a sign warning of the end of the world. He steps through puddles on the sidewalk, while a blood-stained smiley face pin lies in the street. Through panel narration we are introduced to Rorschach's journal, and although we do not yet know it, we see Rorschach himself. The mystery of who murdered the Comedian begins, and over the course of the comic book's twelve issues we become familiar with dozens of characters through flashbacks, text sequences, action scenes, setting shifts, and text supplements. The characters and events that are depicted in the maxi-series are so carefully crafted, memorable, and multi-layered that many readers and critics consider *Watchmen* to be the greatest comic story ever written. As evidence of this respect, it is often described as one of the best-selling graphic novels of all time[1].

One thing that makes *Watchmen* so compelling is that it can be read on a number of levels—as a traditional comic book story, as a murder mystery, as allegory of the comics industry, as political polemic, as alternate history, as a thesis on what the world might be like if superheroes actually existed, and as an ode to tropes and icons of the comics medium. For all of these reasons *Watchmen* offers a fine example of the comic book form, providing characters and narratives that can be enjoyed over and over again. Moreover, its complexity lends the book to critical analysis, and, for the purposes of the current essay, provides a wealth of examples, techniques, and characters idiomatic to the comic book form.

But when people read *Watchmen*, perusing or even studying the comic panels, what are *they* doing? We are not referring here to any sort of metaphysical question or to queries about motivation or engagement, although these certainly are interesting issues; rather, what cognitive processes and textual features guide readers' attempts at comprehending the story?

The approach we offer in this essay in considering how people experience and comprehend *Watchmen* relies on insights from cognitive psychology. Cognitive psychology is a

[1] Of course, *Watchmen* was not initially published as a graphic novel, but rather as twelve serialized comic books. It has since been published continuously in a single collected volume, and in this trade paperback form is sometimes referred to as a graphic novel. Because Moore and Gibbons wrote it as a singly unified, complex story, it can easily be considered as such. The topics to which we relate *Watchmen* in this essay, however, can be readily applied to comics in all of their forms, including but not limited to comic strips, comic books, webcomics, and graphic novels.

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sub-field of the psychological sciences that investigates how people think, reason, learn, and remember, with the goal of both describing what happens when we make sense of our everyday experiences, as well as explaining how we accomplish these activities. Research questions in the field include: How is information encoded into and retrieved from memory? How do we solve problems and make decisions? Under what conditions do people rely on or update prior knowledge? How do these processes influence behavioral performance? And what kinds of errors do people make with respect to these activities? Cognitive psychologists have derived some answers for these questions, grounded in empirical evidence obtained through experimental studies, computational simulations of cognitive processing, and descriptive analyses of human behavior. (Some suggested introductory readings may be found in the Appendix.) The types of theoretical explanations that have emerged from this work have proven crucial to understanding the processes that underlie successful reading.

Consider this: To comprehend what we read, we must decode symbols into letters and words, integrate those words into larger segments of meaning, attempt to relate those segments across sections of discourse, and recruit background knowledge to fill in the parts of the texts that are left out as well as to resolve ambiguities in the material. These processes—of decoding, establishing coherence, building inferences, and constructing mental representations of texts—have been the subject of countless research projects. The result is a broad understanding of the particular textual features, reader variables, and comprehension activities that define our reading experiences. Contemporary models of text processing have sufficient explanatory power along these lines to make valid predictions about what readers do during reading, what they remember after reading, and potential methods of remediating reading difficulties (see Graesser, Gernsbacher, & Goldman, 2003, for discussions on these topics).

Yet the bulk of this work, to date, has focused on reading experiences that involve materials containing only words on a page (like this essay). Unfortunately, while cognitive psychologists have carefully examined text processing, they have tended to avoid considerations of written materials that combine words, pictures, color, and other types of visual cues. And when these projects *have* included images in their accounts, they have tended to focus on procedural depictions (e.g., step-by-step guides, such as instructions on how to put together furniture manuals) or expository figures (e.g., graphs from textbooks or figures from science textbooks) (e.g., Brunyé, Rapp, & Taylor, 2008; Mayer, 2001). Barring a handful of cognitive studies that have implemented children's picture books (e.g., Corrigan & Surber, 2010; Gernsbacher, Varner, & Faust, 1990), the extant literature has not included analyses of how people process written narratives as conveyed through both text *and* images.

The comics medium, then, offers an excellent test bed for the analysis of comprehension which requires the integration of text and images. As with the reading of purely textual narratives, reading comics involves deciphering the meanings of the words on a page, connecting events to meaningful segments of plot, and so on. But arguably, in comics there are different sorts of symbols (e.g., thought balloons as compared to speech balloons), different types of story grammars (e.g., the varied organization of panel sequences), and a variety of inferential activities

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(e.g., guessing what has happened between panels) that guide comprehension, in addition to the standard influences from text-only contents.

In comics, pictures and text support each other; these supports emerge through complementary depictions and descriptions rather than by presenting redundant information. For example, in chapter 6, page 15, of *Watchmen* [2] an unmasked Rorschach describes his origins as a crime fighter to his prison psychiatrist. In that discussion Rorschach talks about the Comedian understanding more than his contemporaries, while the illustrated narrative shows the Comedian behaving in an obnoxious and confrontational manner. This juxtaposition helps to exemplify the traits of the character. The pictures and words provide complementary details that, when integrated, encourage the construction of a more complex model of the story characters and narratives. In most cases, these combined presentations provide richer examples containing more information, and in less space, than would be available in traditional text-only narratives.

In this essay we use *Watchmen* as a case study to illustrate some of the processing influences and consequences that can affect peoples' reading and understanding of comics. This affords the opportunity to outline how comic book comprehension necessitates building off of, rather than relying wholesale upon, contemporary cognitive accounts of text processing. We believe strongly that many of the cognitive processes involved in reading traditional pure-text materials are analogously involved in reading comics; moreover, we offer the possibility that many of these processes are adapted to specific storytelling techniques in comic books. Our goal is to begin to integrate existing research on reading into discussions of how people experience comics, as well as to begin identifying the kinds of insights that comics might provide in the study of naturalistic reading activity. To address these goals we focus here on work that connects with our own research interests, discussing the textual features, reader factors, and cognitive processes that seem crucial in the service of comprehension. This includes discussions of cues, which can guide attention and the types of activities readers engage in during reading; of background knowledge, which readers rely on and may update as they learn from texts; and of inferences about texts, which readers derive from integrating information from both textual cues and background knowledge. Our hope is that this discussion will further motivate interest in and analysis of the ways in which people process comics, and the potential for using comics to identify the cognitive processes that are involved in reading and enjoying them. Unlike previous work, we focus here more directly on an explanation of the cognitive mechanisms involved in reading comics, in an attempt to advance beyond existing epistemological approaches towards describing comics (which, we note, have proved to be quite informative, e.g., McCloud 1993). We begin with a focus on textual cues.

Cues

Linguistic devices can be used to direct attention in a text. For example titles, headings, and warnings can encourage readers to focus on or discount information (e.g., Lorch, Lorch, Ritchey, McGovern, & Coleman, 2001; McCrudden & Schraw, 2007). These cues serve as a type of processing instruction that helps readers determine what to encode in a text stimulus (Givón, 1992) and can provide guidance to facilitate (or when used inappropriately, hinder)

[2] Throughout this essay we will refer to issues of the comic series which were originally published independently as "chapters," to facilitate consultation of either the original twelve comic books or the collected trade paperback.

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readers' comprehension (Peshkam, Mensink, Putnam, & Rapp, 2011; Zwaan & Rapp, 2006). In comics, the types of cues[3] that guide where readers will look, what they will read and reread, the information they will carefully evaluate, and so on, involves more than just words. These cues can include icons, illustrations, and boundary markers, offered on the scale of a panel, page, and/or book. We begin here with an example of a linguistic cue before identifying 'comic-centric' types.

In general, linguistic cues serve to help readers integrate incoming information. Consider the iconic opening words of *Watchmen*: "Rorschach's Journal. October 12th, 1985." (chapter 1, p. 1). These words serve as a cue in several ways. For one, the description orients the reader to a particular setting, which has important implications for comprehension, especially given the story's reliance on Cold War motifs. This helps place the narrative in a particular place and time, potentially allowing the reader to generate cultural and historical associations that might prove relevant to thinking about the story. We also learn from this cue that the narrator, for the time being, is a character named Rorschach who is recording, or has already recorded, his observations and thoughts. But unlike text-only descriptions, these words are represented in a type of "thought balloon" (specifically, a page from Rorschach's journal) which indicates that the information is not being spoken directly to another person. The background color for the information is yellow, in a particular kind of font, which distinguishes it from other instances of text in the book. That color and font pattern quickly becomes associated with Rorschach's thoughts on unfolding events. Clearly this type of cue is a simple one, but it serves an important role in helping readers understand what is happening in the story.

Balloons and narration boxes like these are mainstays of the comics medium, and are critical components of the comics reading experience. They provide a highlighted setting for words, phrases, and sentences, situated in a panel to supplement an illustrated scene (usually) without covering it over. They can vary in size, style, and content. And they can represent a variety of types of verbal and non-verbal utterances; for example, when Rorschach utters "Hurm," we can understand it as a sigh-like sound, or consider it as indicating he is reflecting upon some information. Alternatively, balloons can depict icons to convey thoughts, such as a light bulb signifying an "*Aha*! Moment."

We now identify three iconic types of balloons, which exemplify an important category of cues, illustrate how cues might serve multiple purposes, and indicate more generally how different cues might influence reading:

Speech balloons are often rounded, depicted with solid lines, and refer to spoken language.

Thought balloons are often rounded with cloud-like edges, and refer to private thoughts.

Narration balloons are marginal and rectangular, and provide exposition, often from a specific character's perspective, although occasionally from a third-person perspective.

[3] We use the general term *cues* as an analog to similar cues described in the psycholinguistics and reading comprehension literatures. Many of these, however, are what Scott McCloud (1993) refers to as "clues."

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Figure 1. Example speech, thought, and narration balloons, respectively.

These balloons may all be considered cues as they orient readers' attention and direct specifically *how* their contents might be interpreted—a speech balloon will be read with a different set of expectations than one might have when reading a thought balloon. This goes beyond the actual information contained within the balloons. Word balloons also indicate to readers who or what they should be focusing on (e.g., a main character or a plot point being referred to) *along* with what is being described. After all, speech balloons often employ tails that, when present, orient the reader directly to the character who is "speaking." For example, in chapter 7, page 9, readers need not guess whether Silk Spectre or Nite Owl is speaking; the tails of the balloons direct us to who is talking and in what order the speech was produced. This is an important but potentially overlooked example, precisely because balloons are so ubiquitous; they provide information not just about content, but also about the passage of time, the order in which people are speaking, and more often than not, causal story events.

These balloons' iconic forms are commonly found in almost all comic books, and their utility relies directly upon readers' prior familiarity with their form to ensure they are understood. New readers can become familiar with the basic role of these balloons after viewing only a few of them, employing that understanding when they read future comics by other authors and artists, and even in other media (e.g., newspaper comic strips). Expert readers can additionally impose more innovative meanings on these modulated balloons that the novice might fail to recognize or react to. These expert-novice differences help exemplify the important processing effects that cues can exert on readers. Consider cases from *Watchmen*, but also to be found in other comics, in which word balloons are subtly changed to refer to different types of communication, such as a superhero's telepathic communication, their different voice patterns or moods (e.g., the balloons associated with Doctor Manhattan and Rorschach as compared to Nite Owl and Silk Spectre), and the volume and quality of the speech production (e.g., the more angular balloons associated with voices coming through the Owlship's loudspeaker system).

We have discussed balloons here specifically, but other types of cues include sound effects (which, interestingly, are not used in *Watchmen*), arrows, and panel borders. These might all be identified as categories of micro-level cues, as they focus readers on panel-internal and page-specific instances and information. Classic comics from the 1950's occasionally even included an arrow explicitly directing the reader as to which panel to move to next when the events were arranged in a novel organization. It is also important to note that the cues we describe here are not necessarily mutually exclusive; words, arrows, balloons, and thought bubbles can be combined to great artistic and narrative effect. And more macro-level cues are also a crucial part of a comic readers' experience. Macro-level cues emerge both within a single issue as well as across several issues in a series or comics run. These types of cues include

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features such as the letters page or the publisher's soapbox pages, which usually appear near the end of an issue, cueing the reader that the end of a story or chapter is near. Similarly, when a reader holds the final issue of a twelve issue series in their hands, they likely have expectations of a narrative resolution; knowledge that this is the last part of a story provides a cue for such resolution.

Other macro-level cues can specifically direct readers' attention around a page. Panel structures help guide the reader through a story, conveying meaning through their consistency, irregularities, and ordering. A hallmark of *Watchmen* is that many pages follow a highly-regularized panel structure with 9 panels per page. However, when the story changes this format, for example, when it presents full page panels in chapter 12 to depict the murder of thousands of people in New York City, the change is striking and obvious. The panels serve as cues that this is a momentous event occurring on a much grander scale in comparison to the minor everyday dealings of the characters that has been the focus in the other parts of the story. In other words, full page splashes can cue the importance of a scene in tandem with their contents.

There are other types of cues to be found in *Watchmen* which represent many of the techniques that writers and artists can use to guide reader attention and comprehension. The cover of issue number one (or chapter 1 if you are reading the trade paperback) foreshadows the opening event, the Comedian's murder, with an extreme close-up of the blood-stained smiley face lying in the gutter. Each issue/chapter, like this one, represents a micro-view of a particular important event that will occur within that section of the story. More broadly speaking, although covers are often used to sell single comic books, they can also foreshadow major plot points in the story, and *Watchmen* employs this technique.

Notably, the cover images also provide an indication of the events that will be revealed in the beginning and the end of each chapter, making the cover both an intriguing foreshadowing of events as well as a callback to those events after they have occurred. Other visual cues allow the reader to make inferences about the characters and events in the story. Doctor Manhattan's blue hue is a persistent reminder throughout the story to the reader, the other characters, and arguably Doctor Manhattan himself, that he is different from the other characters. He is the only character who possesses superhuman abilities in the story, and as such, his striking appearance serves to enhance how out of place he is from the events and people in the story. Rorschach's mask plays with iconic representations of character and emotion, with the inkblots conveying specific forms but also remaining open, like Rorschach inkblot themselves, to interpretation. The ever-changing clock motif that recurs through each issue, on the covers, and in critical positions within the narrative (e.g., in Doctor Manhattan's origin story in chapter 4) reinforce the teleological phenomenology of nearing the last few pages of the novel by indicating that time is running out, that something important will happen soon, and that we are almost there. These examples all exploit both text and images to direct reader attention to particular aspects of the novel, while also fostering expectations and understanding for the causal events in the narrative. And as we mentioned, analogous cues and similar cue-based themes can easily be found in other comics.

Background knowledge

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Reading involves identifying the information provided on a printed page or computer screen. However, simply identifying words and pictures proves insufficient for comprehension. Readers must rely on their prior knowledge to guide their understanding of what the letters and lines are attempting to convey. The construction of meaning involves integrating what we already know with what information is being provided to us. Thus, any account of how we experience and comprehend comics must consider not just the ink impressions printed in the book, or the pixels presented on the screen (in the case of digital comics), but also the ways in which readers unpack meaning from those impressions.

Obviously background knowledge matters; but the ways in which background knowledge is activated, and the consequences of those activations for comprehension, are open issues for investigation. For example, in chapter 1, page 5, when we watch Rorschach shoot a grappling hook at the building, we can activate our prior knowledge of what happens, or perhaps more specifically *has* happened when other characters have done the same thing, if we are familiar with characters who exploit grappling hooks[4]. This activation of prior knowledge supports an understanding of the information, such that we can even guess how Rorschach will scale the building and enter the Comedian's apartment before how he uses the hook is properly depicted.

Previous research has demonstrated that these activations do not just enhance comprehension, but also foster memory for what has been read. In a classic series of studies, Bransford and Johnson (1972, 1973) asked participants to read a text, and afterwards, to recall its contents. The text on its own was an inchoate series of details with deliberately ambiguous phrases, such that it proved difficult to understand the theme or point of the text. Consider the opening sentences of that text here:

> The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step, otherwise you are pretty well set.

Participants in a *No Topic* group simply read the text in its ambiguous form. They had no idea that the text was intended to describe the procedure associated with doing laundry. In contrast, participants in a *Topic Before* group received the title "Doing Laundry" before reading the text, and participants in a *Topic After* group were provided the title after reading the text. Participants in the *Topic Before* group rated the text as much more comprehensible than participants in both the *No Topic* or *Topic After* groups. Additionally, participants in the *Topic Before* group remembered about twice as many details from the text as participants in the other groups did. These findings suggest that background knowledge (in this case, knowledge of the topic) helped readers make sense of the text, so much so that they had little difficulty remembering the text's contents after reading. But the findings also indicate that background knowledge needs to be activated *prior to* or *during* any presentation of information in order to help scaffold existing expectations to the incoming information; offering disambiguating information about the topic

[4] This sequence, of course, exploits the background knowledge of readers familiar with Batman from comics, television, movies, and video games.

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after a text has been read is no more useful than if the extra information is completely held back from the reader.

Background knowledge in the above experiment was crucial for comprehension. In the case of *Watchmen*, background knowledge proves similarly important for a reader's experience of the story. The graphic novel contains explicit linguistic and pictorial references to Richard Nixon, the Cold War, and the USSR. While a reader could comprehend the story without recognizing and understanding these concepts, there are instances in which these are critical plot points, and their invocation can enhance enjoyment and engagement in the material. For example, Ozymandias' wall of television screens depicts events replete with references to Nixon, the military, the threat of nuclear Armageddon, and the like. (Also see the first few pages of Chapter 10 for extended sequences with Nixon.) When *Watchmen* was published in the mid-1980s, many of these issues were foregrounded in readers' minds, making it easy to activate relevant information during reading. Today, such activations might not as easily come 'for free,' in that the necessary experiences and knowledge with respect to the Cold War will be less prevalent or available from memory. In fact, these differences suggest interesting studies with respect to how context and plot, and the knowledge sources they recruit, might make different demands of readers due to socio-historical events and the changing demographics of comics readers. (See Carter (2009) for a discussion of these issues in terms of didactic engagement with *Watchmen*.)

Beyond activating facts about history, readers can build more elaborate associations between what they know and what graphic novels tell them; these associations can change the experience of reading the material. Contrast an avid comics fan with a more casual fan, the latter well-versed with icons such as Batman or Superman, and the former unfamiliar with superheroes in general. When reading *Watchmen*, how would these readers differentially think about Nite Owl? In many ways Nite Owl bears striking similarities to other icons such as Batman, and to lesser icons such as the Blue Beetle[5]. If readers notice those similarities, based on their existing knowledge and familiarity with comic characters, they might be primed to notice more allusions among the characters than might someone who is less familiar. These allusions are not explicitly identified or explained in the story; readers can only become aware of them based on their existing knowledge.

Thus, the enjoyment a reader derives from their reading of *Watchmen* may be a function of the type of analysis they apply to the text, aspects of which come out of the connections and associations they make with other ideas and concepts in their background knowledge. Readers might even generate expectations for how characters will behave based on prior knowledge (e.g., that Nite Owl will have similar behaviors and beliefs as Batman or Blue Beetle, fighting crime to the bitter end but refusing to use deadly tactics to defeat his foes). Indeed, these prospective differences in reading experience as a function of familiarity with character iconicity suggest an

[5] In fact, early versions of Moore's proposal for the story intended to use characters from Charlton comics, such as Blue Beetle, but were eventually replaced by the novel characters he created with Gibbons specifically for *Watchmen* (Jensen, 2005).

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interesting set of potential research studies with respect to how readers make allegorical links between characters, and how these derived connections influence comprehension and enjoyment.

Any work on such an issue would necessarily make reference to existing models of knowledge representation in the field of cognitive science. These models are intended to describe how background knowledge is organized in the mind. A full listing of such models is beyond the scope of the current essay, but we refer to some here that are particularly relevant to the discussion. One early such model, offered by Schank and Ableson (1977), conceptualized knowledge as clustered into meaningful groupings (see also Sharkey & Mitchell, 1985). For example, we have a mental *script* for the events that take place when we make coffee; this includes filling a coffee pot, heating the water, pouring the water over grounds, waiting, and adding cream or sugar to the freshly-brewed coffee. These activities are encoded in the script for 'making coffee,' and are activated from memory when we engage in the activity. In fact, scripts like these (e.g., going to a restaurant, registering for classes, building a house) are so well-worn that when someone tells you they just made coffee, you need not consider every single step. Rather, you can make assumptions that the steps associated with the script were taken. Scripts aid comprehension by "filling-in" details that have gone unmentioned (Zwaan & Rapp, 2006).

There are several instances in *Watchmen* for which individuals' scripts for events can be invoked by what they read. For example, in chapter 7, page 11, Silk Spectre visits Nite Owl and they begin to make coffee, which likely activates knowledge for that activity. The drawings indeed show elements of that script. This facilitates the presentation of the material, as the authors need not depict every action in the script sequence, counting on readers to infer what has been left "unsaid." Countless other such instances may be found in *Watchmen*, as they are to be in any story, movie, or scene we read about or view during narrative experiences.

So, given that prior knowledge is useful, is applied during reading, and is organized in a systematic and useful fashion in memory, an important question remains: How does that knowledge *become* activated? Currently, several models of memory have considered conditions under which information is automatically activated, outside of any conscious control by the reader, as well as conditions under which information is activated only after strategic, careful deliberation (e.g., Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; O'Brien, Rizzella, Albrecht, & Halleran, 1998). For example, the mere mention of the term 'Manhattan' might spontaneously evoke knowledge of locations (e.g., in New York City), historical events (e.g., The Manhattan Project), and perhaps metropolitan cityscapes in general. Thus, when readers learn about the character Doctor Manhattan, related concepts and ideas might be activated that further flesh out their interpretations of him. Readers less familiar with the various concepts associated with 'Manhattan' may need to search memory and make connections more deliberately. But regardless of whether information is automatically activated or strategically retrieved, the result is a constructed understanding of the events described in the book, which reflects individual differences in readers' prior knowledge. Comic aficionados might decide that Doctor Manhattan resembles Captain Atom, academics might find purchase in comparing him with Nietzsche's notion of the übermensch, critical theorists might see him as the embodiment of nuclear annihilation, newcomers to the book might conceptualize him as a fantastic imaginary hero, and

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detractors of the story might see him a simple deus ex machina. All of these constructions are in some sense correct, and each construction contributes to a different experience of reading the character.

Inferences

Authors and illustrators often have a lot of story they wish to convey to readers. If it were solely in their hands, they would need to provide an enormous amount of information to ensure that their readership could understand everything that happens in a plot. Thankfully, some of the work can be taken out of their hands: readers exert considerable effort in the service of comprehending what they read. They generate inferences about the events in a story, as well as about events that were not shown or discussed at all. These inferences require that readers make logical or story-driven bridges between events explicitly depicted in the story, as well as connections between things that have occurred in the story and possibilities for the future. Readers add information to texts, building coherence across events in ways that, as we mentioned previously, "fill-in" missing information. They do this by connecting the cues in stories with their prior knowledge.

A large body of work has demonstrated convincingly that inferences are commonly generated as readers process text descriptions. Consider the following two sentences:

We checked the picnic supplies. The beer was warm.

Readers do not need to be explicitly told that the picnic supplies included beer. Indeed, readers appear to construct such inferences spontaneously, given their prior knowledge of the fact that picnic supplies can include beer (Haviland and Clark, 1974). Prior knowledge about such information helps readers generate the necessary connections so that every little bit of information need not be provided.

As we discussed earlier, readers make similar inferences in comic stories. Depictions of characters going to a restaurant need not show every single event. Instead, a single panel in a restaurant can convey the notion that other, likely unimportant, things happened, which were nevertheless traditional occurrences for normal circumstances associated with going to a restaurant, such as opening the restaurant's door or sitting down in a booth. Readers can fill in these sorts of details from memory. They do this in particular for actions that are described in graphic narratives, in such a way that after reading they often incorrectly report that those inferred actions actually appeared in the story, when in fact they were only implied (Kopp, Magliano, & Rapp, 2010).

But the types of inferences that readers infer are not restricted to events shown or left out of single panels. The nature of sequential graphic narratives is such that an enormous amount of stuff goes on in between the panels. Characters appear in a scene, and rather than show every moment of that scene, selected moments are made available to the reader. So inferences must be made by the reader respect to what happened between the panels. Consider the prison break sequence in chapter 8; on page 21, as the characters mark their escape, we need to infer that

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Rorschach has leapt to the Owlship, and that Nite Owl has steered them away from the jail. This complex sequence of actions is inferred from the handful of static pictures that are shown.

Another important type of inference for comprehending stories is a predictive judgment. Predictions involve the forecasting of events that have not yet occurred. Some researchers have characterized predictions as a type of mental time travel, by which readers use what they know to generate expectations for what they *think* will happen. Sometimes these predictions are fairly obvious, such as when Jon becomes trapped in the intrinsic field test chamber as Doctor Manhattan recounts his origin (in chapter 4, page 7); we know how things are going to turn out, so a prediction is relatively trivial. However, at other times the possibilities for what will occur are less unconstrained, which makes it more of a challenge to predict how events will unfold. For instance, in chapter 12, page 17, when Doctor Manhattan reappears at Ozymanidas' base, it is unclear exactly what will happen, although we might expect he will attack Ozymandias. Even more difficult is what we think will happen at the beginning of the entire story given that we have little context for who the major players are and what their motivations might be.

An important difference between predictive inferences and the types of bridging inferences we described earlier is that predictive inferences do not appear to arise obligatorily (McKoon & Ratcliff, 1992). That is, predictive inferences seem to occur only when texts make them necessary or when particular task goals encourage their construction. For example, at the end of the story, when Rorschach's notebook is left in the hands of the newspaper reporters, readers need not infer what might happen next unless they specifically work to do so. These predictive inferences are not necessary for story comprehension (after all, the story is concluded), but when they are constructed, they offer supplemental methods of enriching a reading experience. In this way, discussions of cliffhangers about what is likely to happen next in a story can be seen as an enjoyable ways to remain engaged with a narrative and its characters.

Readers can also make other types of inferences. These can include deductive inferences about how particular events or sequences are related—for example, deducing that Kovacs (the sign carrier from the first page of the story) is Rorschach before the actual "reveal" in the narrative, although this is likely a very difficult inference to make. Another kind of inference might involve authorial intent; that is, beliefs about why writers or artists might have selected particular design elements or motifs. For example, consider chapter 5 of *Watchmen* (entitled "Fearful Symmetry") which is itself a type of Rorschach: events are mirrored at the beginning and end of the issue, and this mirror-like continuity is maintained in a middle section showing the attempted attack on Ozymandias. If readers are made aware of this, they might make inferences about the goals Moore had for structuring the story, or for the decisions Gibbons made with respect to illustrating the symmetric events. More generally for the entire series, readers might come to feel as though the purpose of the story was to provide a commentary on comics icons and character types, or perhaps was offered as a criticism of Cold War policies and politics. These types of experiential outcomes represent inferences that are meta-analytic, involving the integration of textual internal cues and depictions to develop beliefs about the purposes of the text.

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All of the above types of inferences are precisely the types of extensions, complements, and consequences of reading experiences that are often taken as an indication of successful comprehension (Kintsch, 1998; Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). In order to fully understand what a text is about, readers must go beyond the words or pictures presented in the material; they must add to, decipher, and engage in the type of deductive work necessary to construct an interpretation of the content (and perhaps its cultural and sociohistoric relevance). Inferences, then, represent readers' integration of the cues they extract from the text with the knowledge they bring to the experience.

Conclusion

The goal of this essay was to outline some of the ways in which examination of the features and activities associated with comic book comprehension might be informed by, and inform, cognitive analyses of reading. We focused here on bottom-up information like the cues that readers extract from texts, as well as top-down knowledge that readers bring to those texts. The result of the interactions between these sources can include inferences that complement and extend the material of interest. Here we used *Watchmen* as an example of such material, partially given its privileged status as a classic comic story, and partially given its reputation as a complex literary work that can be read at a variety of levels. However, we wish to make clear that any comic written for any age group on any topic would likely be amenable to the types of analyses discussed herein.

While our focus in this essay was on the cognitive processes involved in the comprehension of comics, future work might consider analogous issues with respect to the application of comics in classroom settings. Students (from K to 12 and beyond) need to learn a variety of literacy skills to support their understanding of textual sources, as well as the contexts in which those sources have developed. For instance, media literacy coursework is intended to foster students' evaluative considerations and applications of information from television, radio, internet, and other formal and informal news sources. The associated curricula require that students become familiar with a variety of media, building comprehension skills that are both specific to each source, while also acquiring more general skills that extend across literacy venues and modalities.

Comics can serve to encourage the development of critical literacy skills, such as the integration of textual and visual forms into coherent understandings. In addition, comics, both in their traditional paper versions (including floppy monthlies, trade paperbacks, and manga volumes), as well as the growing digital market, offer a popular and fun means of conveying information, including narrative stories and expository concepts. Indeed, in recent years there has been a plethora of "expository comics," intended to convey non-fiction information or historical events; these seem to rely on an assumption that students will be more engaged with comics than with traditional textbooks. Moreover, sequential art can inform the design of curricula, internet sites, and other media intended to convey educational information—understandings of the processes involved in comprehending comics could expand to other mixed media texts. A failure to consider comics in an account of reading comprehension represents an ignorance of common, useful, and engaging narrative forms, and leaves out important aspects of how people understand

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stories which venture beyond the level of the written word. We hope that this brief discussion will help to initiate discussion about these concerns, and encourage continued empirical investigation of graphic novel comprehension.

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Appendix

Readers who wish to explore cognitive psychology further may find some of the following readings useful and interesting. These vary in complexity and scope, from popular psychology books to textbooks, anthologies, and monographs.

Damasio, A. (2009). *Reading in the brain*. New York: Viking.

Gerrig, R.J. (1993). *Experiencing narrative worlds*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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Lost [and Found] Girls: Teaching a College Course in Alan Moore

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Lost [and Found] Girls: Teaching a College Course in Alan Moore

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Introduction

"You're actually teaching *Lost Girls*?!" was the surprised reaction from one of my colleagues after examining my list of readings for a summer topics course focused on the works of Alan Moore. Had I lost my mind in including such a controversial work in my reading list? After all, shortly after I requested a copy for our campus library's collection, *Lost Girls* raised eyebrows among the acquisition staff and even went missing from the shelves (only to turn up a week later in a forlorn corner of the stacks). Yes, I explained to my colleague that I felt I had to include this particular text. Working in collaboration with artist Melinda Gebbie, Moore sought to produce a work of pornography—not for its sensational value but because it represented an important step in the evolution of the writer, demonstrating the risks he was willing to take as he explored yet one more unorthodox storytelling venue in a career characterized by atypical stories.

Strangely, I found it more comforting that peers, librarians and eventually students were more interested in a dialogue about my selection of specific works than in any sort of second guessing the subject of the course itself. After all, never before had someone at my institution offered a stand-alone course devoted to the works of a single comic book creator.. No one seemed concerned that such a course could stand alongside our institution's other courses focused on individual genius (e.g., Shakespeare, Hemingway). Perhaps I had softened up overt resistance through having taught a survey course in Graphic Storytelling for the past half decade. Or maybe it was the way in which people already knew Moore for his influence on culture, albeit through the adaptation of his works that have made their way to the silver screen or his own distinctive media presence (as evidenced by his cameo appearance on *The Simpsons*). But for whatever reason, I was delighted that people were more intrigued by the specific contents of the syllabus than the larger idea that a comic book writer could be the subject of a college-level course.

Of course, anyone familiar with Alan Moore is well-aware that the breadth and depth of his body of work makes him, arguably, the most likely of any English language comics creator to justify a course-length treatment. Not only does his career stretch over a span of more than three decades, but his body of work moves across genres and has garnered acclaim both within and beyond the comics industry. Moore has not only produced superhero narratives (*Top Ten*) but science fiction (*Halo Jones*), horror (*Swamp Thing*), and historical fiction (*From Hell*), among other genres. His efforts have won him recognition such as multiple wins of the Eisner Award,

the comics' industry's equivalent of the "Oscars," and even a World Fantasy Award. In fact, it was Moore's very reputation for effective storytelling that inspired this course. Having read *Watchmen,* Moore's seminal collaboration with Dave Gibbons, a sizeable group of students in my fall Graphic Storytelling course indicated an interest in doing term projects focused on additional works by Moore.

Because so many of them had listed Moore as an author whose works of which they wanted to read more, I jokingly suggested that we should form a topics course to explore them more thoroughly. A handful of them called me on my offer, and thereafter I began to plan the course for the next summer. I started by assembling as complete a bibliography of Moore's oeuvre as I could compile and began to read those works that I had not previously. Several works were out of print at the time, including the collected editions of early works done in the United Kingdom for *2000 A.D.* such as *The Ballad of Halo Jones* and *D.R. and Quinch.* Figuring out just which works to include was a chore.

For instance, *Promethea* gets very interesting the further along it goes, but covering all five trade paperbacks would mean sacrificing coverage of other works. I decided to keep this as a survey of Moore's career and so had to cut short covering something like *Promethea* indepth. Then I began to actively recruit students from my previous courses to sign up for the summer session on Moore. I had expected that handful, and maybe a few more students to join us, but I was pleasantly surprised to have seventeen students enroll for the course (where most summer offering top out at five participants)! I had underestimated Moore's appeal but I found myself gladly adapting to the challenge of managing a popular course, one that ultimately included *Lost Girls* and so many more of Moore's masterful works.

Explanation of Materials

As one can see in the syllabus below, my approach to teaching the works of Alan Moore relied on a number of strategies. Such a knowledge-building approach has similarly been suggested in James Bucky Carter's pedagogy for teaching *Watchmen.* For my part, the variety was inspired by the need to keep the class format diverse and lively, as we met for a three-hour evening session, twice a week. My curriculum included five regular features:

1) Discussions over readings of Moore's major works, from *V for Vendetta* to *Lost Girls* (and while I guided the flow, students were assigned to bring in questions that they wanted to address each session);
2) Student-led research presentations providing context for either Moore's cultural exigency (e.g., Margaret Thatcher's U.K.) or details on his collaborators (e.g., Eddie Campbell), which I called the "Even Moore Presentations" with tongue pressed firmly in cheek;
3) Readings of supplemental scholarly critiques of Moore's work to help students see how sophisticated interpretations of the works could be performed;

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4) Introduction of basic comics theory (e.g., Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*) since I could not assume everyone had already taken Graphic Storytelling and knew the difference between a panel and a word balloon); and
5) Multimedia representations of Moore and his works.

This last consideration was perhaps the most enjoyable to assemble and ultimately led me to use everything from cartoon adaptations of Moore's stories (e.g., "For the Man Who Has Everything" from *Justice League*) to playing a CD of "Snakes and Ladders," a performance piece Moore recorded on stage. The results kept the regular sessions engaging and spoke to different learning styles. These choices were guided by an attempt to be cognizant of the lessons in multimodality that comics embody (see Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila, for further exploration).

Above and beyond our evening sessions, I asked the students to develop a conference-style essay addressing some thematic issues across the works. I turned our final class session into a celebration of these efforts and organized a conference style set of panels, invited faculty and students from across the campus to attend, and convinced my dean to buy some donuts for refreshments. The session was a welcomed coda to our exploration of Moore and his works, and I've included the titles of the student projects organized into panels. The students really seemed to enjoy sharing their insights with one another and a wider audience of about a dozen guests composed of their fellow summer session students and a few of my faculty colleagues, and two students later joined me in the fall for a panel presentation over Alan Moore at the Champion City Comic Con, a local comic book convention.

I had approached the course acknowledging that I did not fully understood Alan Moore or his works, and I let my students join me on a journey of discovery. While there was always a risk that we might get lost in the milieu of Moore's mind, I was pleased with what we found: A deeper appreciation not only of the author and his works, but the ability to examine unapologetically a creator working in the comics medium.

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Syllabus: The Graphic Novels of Alan Moore

Course Description

This is a course examining the works of British graphic novelist Alan Moore, who has earned international recognition for his storytelling ability. In fact, Moore's *Watchmen* (created in collaboration with artist Dave Gibbons) is the only graphic novel considered by *Time* to be among the one hundred best works of fiction in the twentieth century. Alongside notables such as *Maus* creator Art Spiegelman and *Sin City* creator Frank Miller, Moore is often cited as one of the driving talents in maturing comics from juvenilia to literary repute. Within the medium itself, his influence is undeniable, as colleagues and fans acknowledge him as one of the most accomplished—if not *the* most accomplished—storytellers of his generation.

We will examine key selections from Moore's oeuvre, or body of work, as well as biographical and critical examinations to come to a better understanding of Moore, his creations, and his legacy. Class meetings will be conducted in seminar style, with discussion driven by student inquiry.

Course Objectives

This course makes available to you the following opportunities:

- to apply several aesthetic principles that guide comics criticism
- to develop an appreciation for the creativity and expression exhibited in comics
- to sharpen your ability to ask and answer critical questions about literary expression
- to understand the works of Alan Moore, including the major themes, storytelling techniques, and messages of his oeuvre

Texts

Khoury, G. (2008). *The extraordinary works of Alan Moore: Indispensable edition.* Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing. ISBN 1-6054-9009-1. $29.95.

Moore, A., & Gibson, I. (2005). *The ballad of Halo Jones.* New York: DC Comics. ISBN 1-4012-0590-9. $17.99.

Moore, A., & Lloyd, D. (2008). *V for vendetta.* New York: Vertigo. ISBN 1-4012-0841-X. $19.99.

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Moore, A., Bissette, S. R., & Totleben, J. (2009). *Saga of the Swamp Thing, book one*. New York: Vertigo. ISBN 1-4012-2082-7. $24.99.

Moore, A. (2006). *DC universe: The stories of Alan Moore*. New York: DC Comics. ISBN 1-4012-0927-0. $19.99.

Moore, A., & Gibbons, D. (1995). *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics. ISBN 0-9302-8923-4. $19.99

Moore, A., & Zarate, O. (2003). *A small killing*. Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press. ISBN 1-5929-1009-2. $16.95.

Moore, A. (2003). *Alan Moore's writing for comics*. Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press. ISBN 1-5929-1012-2. $5.95.

Moore, A., & Campbell, E. (2000). *From hell*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions. ISBN 0-9585-7834-6. $35.00.

Moore, A., & O'Neill, K. (2002). *The league of extraordinary gentlemen, vol. 1*. New York: America's Best Comics. ISBN 1-5638-9858-6. $14.99.

Moore, A., & Ha, G. Cannon, Z., & Ha, G. (20035). *Top ten: The forty-niners*. New York: Wildstorm. ISBN 978-1-4012-0573-7. $17.99.

Moore, A., Williams, J. H. III, Gray, M. (2001). *Promethea, book 1*. New York: Wildstorm. ISBN 1-5638-9667-2. $14.99.

Moore, A., & Gebbie, M. (2009). *Lost girls*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions. ISBN 1-6030-9044-4. $45.00.

In addition those listed above, a number of required readings will be available on Moodle.

Assignments

Attendance and Participation

This is a discussion-based learning experience requiring you to talk through the material in order to promote understanding of it for yourself and the benefit of others. Consequently, you have the opportunity to earn points for your participation on the evenings that we meet. However, these points are not automatic but rather awarded based on your engagement with the material and the other participants in the class.

Reading Comprehension Quizzes

In order to encourage and reward you for keeping up with the assigned readings, a reading comprehension quiz will be administered at the start of each class. Preparing for these quizzes should help you begin to learn the material and consequently promote informed class discussion. These quizzes are also an incentive to be present in class, as there will be no make-ups (should you be absent) or time extensions (should you arrive to class tardy) with them. However, I will drop your two lowest scores (including any missing scores) before averaging for your grade.

Discussion Questions

With each of the twelve major works that we will read, I will ask you to bring to class a set of five discussion questions. These questions should be open-ended discussion prompts that pierce beyond a superficial reading of the text. In other words, they should not be comprehension questions (e.g., "Where do we first meet V?") but queries that prompt discussion (e.g., "Why is the Professor the perfect villain for the

League?"). These questions may address issues that you are genuinely unclear about or they may be related to issues you already have tentative conclusions about but wish to discuss with others.

Please bring two typed copies of your questions to class: one to hand in to me as we begin our session and one for you to reference during our opening discussion of the text. These questions are due at the start of class and will not be accepted for credit thereafter. However, if you are absent because of serious illness or a death in the family, I will accept these for credit if I can receive them sufficiently in advance of the class session for me to present them to your peers.

Even Moore Presentation

In order to help us understand some additional context for the works we read, you will conduct research into and present information about a supplemental topic related to Alan Moore to the rest of class. These topics may include collaborators, historical contexts, characters, or other topics that help us flesh out our understanding of Moore. You will need to consult a minimum of six (6) sources in researching your topic. Of these, only a third may come from the internet (e.g., two of six); however, you can use the computer to access previously published sources indexed in databases. This material should appear in the session and be orally cited. I will ask you to submit a working bibliography at the start of the second week of classes to be sure that you are working diligently on this research.

Please prepare either a handout or PowerPoint presentation to share with the class (you need not do both). On the day of the presentation, please be sure to provide me with a copy of your handout or a print-out of your PowerPoint before you begin presenting.

Feel free to be creative and inventive with this session, employing the most engaging teaching techniques you've seen from other instructors, including—but not limited to—incorporating a sample reading, showing a video clip, performing a skit, engaging the class in an exercise, leading a discussion, providing supplemental reading, etc. Let your inventiveness for engaging the class guide you, but be sure to communicate substantial information about your topic by the time you are done.

Your presentation should have an essential message (i.e., thesis) that you want your audience to take from the session. It would also be helpful to have a structure that suggests key points that help organize the "take aways" that you want everyone to learn about the topic.

You should time your presentation to last no less than 10 minutes and no longer than 20 minutes. Time permitting, we may have time for some questions and answers to follow. Students missing their presentation date may forfeit the opportunity to earn credit on this course requirement.

Final Essay

The final project allows you to develop a conference-ready paper over some aspect of Alan Moore's works, synthesizing the relevant discussions we have read over the course of the summer and augmented by your own research and thoughtful analysis. Ideally, the ability to speak intelligently to the Moore's works translates into an intelligent, original contribution to the scholarly literature.

This essay should be built around a thesis (i.e., an argument) that examines themes within the work and applies aesthetic concepts to it. The thesis should be supported with evidence pulled from primary works (i.e., the graphic novels) as well as some commentary from secondary sources. Your aim is to provide insight into the meanings within Moore's texts.

I would expect this essay should run a minimum of 2,500 words (approximately 10 double-spaced pages). More content is welcomed! Please adapt this paper to MLA or APA style guidelines.

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In order to encourage you to focus on this project early on, I will request a one-page proposal from you on Wednesday, May 26. Every week thereafter for the next four weeks I will ask you to add a page to this proposal ("Proposal +1") adding insight or development based on the new material, our previous week's discussion, or your own research. At any point, you can change topics if you find that one under development just isn't working out for you. I will also sponsor a Writing Workshops in class on Wednesday, June 30. Please bring two drafts of your essay to class that day in order to participate and earn credit.

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Course Calendar

The following is a plan for moving forward through the course content. Although I will adhere to the below calendar as closely as possible, it might be necessary to adjust dates as we progress through the session.

Date	Class Session	Assignments
Wednesday, May 19	Course Introduction Discussion topic: *Greyshirt* Supplemental Critique: "Biopic" by Millidge Comics Theory: Basic Definitions Multimedia: *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*	
	Flashbacks and Flashforwards	
Monday, May 24	Brainstorm Themes and Directions for Projects Discussion Topic: Moore's Biography Even Moore Presentation Model: *Miracle Man* Supplemental Critique: "The Time of Heroes" Comics Theory: Auteur Theory Multimedia: George Khoury Live!	Read *Extraordinary Works* Even Moore working bibliography due
Wednesday, May 26	Discussion Topic: Moore's Early British Work Even Moore Presentation: N/A Supplemental Critique: "Chronotypes" Comics Theory: Closure in the Gutters Multimedia: *V for Vendetta* preview	Read *Halo Jones* & Di Liddo One-page proposal due
	From Britain to America	
Monday, May 31	Discussion Topic: *V for Vendetta* Even Moore Presentation: Margaret Thatcher's U.K. Supplemental Critique: "V's Terrorism" Comics Theory: The Frame Multimedia: *Swamp Thing* preview	Read *V for Vendetta* & Keller
Wednesday, June 2	Discussion Topic: *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* Even Moore Presentation: John Constantine Supplemental Critique: "Analysis of *Swamp Thing* #20" Comics Theory: Expressive Anatomy Multimedia: Len Wein on the Swamp Thing's creation	Read *Swamp Thing* & Bissette Proposal + 1 due
Friday , June 4	Discussion Topic: Early Superhero Comics Even Moore Presentation: Creators' Rights and The Big Two Supplemental Critique: "The House of the Magus" Comics Theory: The Superhero Genre Multimedia: *Justice League* "For the Man Who Has Everything"	Read *DC Universe* & Wolk

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Date	Class Session	Assignments
	Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?	
Monday, June 7	Discussion Topic: *Watchmen* Even Moore Presentation: Dave Gibbons Supplemental Critique: "Who Watches . . . ?" Comics Theory: Composition & Layout Multimedia: *Watchmen* extras	Read *Watchmen* & Hughes Proposal + 2 due
Wednesday, June 9	Discussion Topic: *A Small Killing* Even Moore Presentation: Moore in Other Media Supplemental Critique: Moore on Writing Comics Theory: Industrial v. Artisan Processes Multimedia: *The Simpsons*	Read *A Small Killing* *& Writing for Comics*
	Royal Britannia	
Monday, June 14	Discussion Topic: *From Hell* Even Moore Presentation: Eddie Campbell Supplemental Critique: N/A Comics Theory: Line Multimedia: *From Hell* extras	Read *From Hell*
Wednesday, June 16	Discussion Topic: *From Hell* Even Moore Presentation: Ripperology Supplemental Critique: "Looking Inside Out" Comics Theory: Adaptations Multimedia: *From Hell* screening	Read Coppin Proposal + 3 due
Friday, June 18	Discussion Topic: *The League* Even Moore Presentation: Jekyll & Hyde Supplemental Critique: Nivens' *Heroes & Monsters* Comics Theory: Inter-textuality Multimedia: *LXG*	Read *LXG* & Nivens

Reading Graphic Novels

Get physically prepared. Sit up, get settled (but not too relaxed) to read, and minimize competing stimuli (e.g., turn off the TV or iPod).

Read twice. The first reading should really be to orient yourself to the story. The second reading should be to scrutinize the storytelling techniques.

Discern, not just enjoy. Comics are often pleasurable, and it's okay to enjoy yourself during a read; however, as a critic your task is to discern meaning from the comics and/or apply concepts even while you are enjoying it.

Take notes! As a critic you are *studying* comics. Take notes over relevant passages and most especially observations you make as you consume the comic, especially on that second read through.

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ABCs

Monday, June 21	Discussion Topic: *Top Ten* Even Moore Presentation: GLBT in Comics Supplemental Critique: "America's Best Comics" Comics Theory: Time Multimedia: *Hill Street Blues*	Read *Top Ten: The Forty-Niners* & Klock Proposal + 4 Due
Wednesday, June 23	Discussion Topic: *Promethea* Even Moore Presentation: Women in Comics Supplemental Critique: "The Radiant City" Comics Theory: Balloons Multimedia: *Snakes and Ladders* performance CD	Read *Promethea* & Lioi

Lost and Found

Monday, June 28	Discussion Topic: *Lost Girls* Even Moore Presentation: Melinda Gebbie Supplemental Critique: "ImageSext" Comics Theory: Color Theory Multimedia: *L. Frank Baum: The Man Behind the Curtain*	Read *Lost Girls* & Hatfield
Wednesday, June 30	Discussion Topic: Writing Workshop Even Moore Presentation: TBA Supplemental Critique: "Why Don't . . ." Comics Theory: Cartooning is not Filmmaking Multimedia: Moore at the Movies	Bring Workshop Draft & Read Meskin
Friday, July 1	Final essay due by 6:30 p.m.	

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Program for Conference-Style Final Presentations

An Evening with Alan Moore

Welcome and Introduction

Panel #1 Departure Point: Who Is Alan Moore and What Does He Stand For?

"The World According to Alan Moore"

"Alan Moore's Real Life and His Writings"

"Alan Moore's Personal Image Shown through His Comics"

"The Influence of Magic on the Life and Works of Alan Moore"

"The Question of Authenticity in Moore's Works: A Heideggaerian Analysis"

Panel # 2 The Alan Moore Narrative: A Compelling Darkness Falls

"Alan Moore and Character Development"

"Be We Evil or Be We Good"

"Themes of Corruption and Violence in the Works of Alan Moore"

"What is Evil? Flannery O'Connor Meets Alan Moore"

Panel #3 Fire, Anarchy, and Pornography: Themes of Innocence and Transformation

"From Innocence to Awareness"

"Bringing Change through Fire and Dreams"

"Anarchy in the Works of Alan Moore"

"Pornographic Art: Lost or Found?"

Panel # 4 Adapting Moore

"Did Video Kill the Comic Book Star? The Impact of Film Adaptations on the Comic Industry"

"Analyzing *Watchmen, V for Vendetta* and *From Hell* from a Film Studies Perspective"

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Learning "Stuff" and Using V for Vendetta in the Composition Classroom

Stacey Kikendall
University of New Mexico

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Learning "Stuff" and Using *V for Vendetta* in the College Composition Classroom

By Stacey Kikendall
University of New Mexico

The premise of Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* is that England has devolved into a dystopian military state after a nuclear world war. The ruling party has destroyed all art, music, and literature that encourage difference or free thought; likewise, any person who does not fit into the white, heterosexual norm is sent to concentration camps. The plot primarily follows young Evey Hammond, a 16-year-old female who unintentionally becomes involved in a revolution against the state when she is saved by the masked villain/hero, V. The plot is intricate and layered with multiple storylines that ultimately reveal V as a master manipulator who has been guiding everyone's actions. Besides its hybrid form combining text and images, *V for Vendetta* contains adult themes, sophisticated language, and complex cultural references, making it an ideal text for college students who are often at the developmental level and need engaging, challenging narratives. Not only does the graphic novel improve students' verbal literacy skills, it also improves their visual literacy, which is becoming increasingly important in their day-to-day lives. But the fact that *V for Vendetta* is also considered popular culture makes the students more likely to enjoy themselves as they learn crucial critical skills; as one of my students declared, "I had fun reading *V for Vendetta* and learned stuff, too!"[1]

For the past few years, I have been experimenting with using graphic novels[2] (specifically *V for Vendetta)* in my 200-level expository writing course at the University of New Mexico. The course is an extension of freshman English in that it builds on critical thinking and writing skills, but it also has a central theme chosen by the instructor, in my case "Heroes of the People." Throughout the semester, I use a variety of different texts, from novels to movies to television to scholarly articles,[3] most of which were or are considered popular texts as opposed to traditionally academic ones. I find these texts to be more accessible for students, because they

[1] Taken from my Spring 2010 course evaluations.

[2] Borrowing James Bucky Carter's definition, a graphic novel is "a book-length sequential art narrative featuring an anthology-style collection of comic art, a collection of reprinted comic book issues comprising a single story line (or arc), or an original, stand-alone graphic narrative" (1).

[3] In the semester-long course, I ask my students to read excerpts from Johnston McCulley's *The Mark of Zorro* and Isabella Allende's *Zorro*, Baroness Orczy's novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, the film *Star Wars: A New Hope, Episode IV*, two episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* "Welcome to the Hellmouth" and "Halloween," and their choice of Batman story. I also have the students read several scholarly articles, including "Z/Z: Isabel Allende and the Mark of Zorro" by Philip Swanson, "The Global Communication Environment of Heroes" by Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, and excerpts from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I will discuss the specific texts I use in reference to *V for Vendetta* in the rest of the article.

usually are directly tapped into cultural ideologies that students can relate to, such as rebelling against "the Man" or simply negotiating relationships. Moreover, popular culture creates communities in which viewers/readers have a shared knowledge and language, and students respond positively when they believe their opinions have authority and validity. The variety of texts we examine also encourages students to expand their literacy skills. As the editors of *Teaching in the Pop Culture Zone* explain, it is necessary to develop "these multiple literacies to prepare students for the media-driven world in which we live, and they challenge us as teachers to try new genres and technologies."

My class concludes with *V for Vendetta*, because it is a good way to combine the variety of skills the students have learned in considering different genres and media. In addition, the blurred line V straddles between hero and villain further complicates the definitions the class had previously constructed. We analyze *V for Vendetta* as if it were any other literary text from our class: we find themes, analyze characters, and examine the contextual elements (history, setting, etc). While the graphic novel does not follow the form of a traditional novel, it still revolves around a central narrative plot. The students' familiarity with this kind of analysis, which they have been doing with varying degrees of complexity since middle school, gives us a way into the text. In addition, of course, we explore the ways images are being used to complement or oppose the written text. Images and words are no longer considered to be separate forms with no interaction; as Charles A. Hill argues, "the boundary separating text from images has always been little more than a convenient fiction, and as new computer technologies become more sophisticated and more dominant, this fiction is becoming quite inconvenient" (127). In encouraging my students to examine both the visual and written, I hope to expand their capacity for rhetorical analysis.

As in most first-year writing programs at the college level, the students have specific outcomes they need to achieve. At the University of New Mexico, we have the same three outcomes for each of our introductory writing courses. The outcomes are "Finding and Evaluating Information," "Composing Documents," and "Presenting Documents," and they become increasingly more complex as the student progresses through the classes. English 220: Expository Writing is the third course in the sequence and presumes that the student has passed English 101 and 102 or tested out of them. Thus, I expect the students to have encountered different genres and writing situations, primary and secondary research, and have experience with argument and analysis. However, I also expect students to struggle with more complex incarnations of genre and analysis. As 220 is often the last English course students will take in their college career, I also feel pressure to prepare them to use their newfound critical thinking and writing skills in less obvious situations and contexts.

For my particular section of English 220, students improve these skills by focusing on the general topic of "Heroes of the People", which include Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel, V and Evey, Luke Skywalker, Batman, and Buffy. The topic, texts, and themes discussed in the course should find echoes in most students as, regardless of our age, race, gender, or nationality, we all have ideas of what a hero should or shouldn't be. In using a variety of textual formats, the students learn to use and adapt their critical skills in different circumstances. By focusing on "Heroes of the People" for the main topic of the class, I am able to address a variety of interesting themes such as hidden identities, heroism vs. criminality, revolution, governmental

control, nationalism, race, class, and gender. In addition to their popular appeal, these stories reveal interesting historical and cultural beliefs that are still relevant today as well as the changes in technology. Students start to make connections with their own lives and the modern political and social context. I believe in giving the students the critical tools they need and showing them how they can be used in different circumstances, from academic closed-form writing to film reviews to presentations. In doing this, I help them to realize that no matter the topic or the class they can be more critical thinkers and writers. All of their writing assignments address aspects of the 220 outcomes, but the larger projects ask them to use all outcomes – thus demonstrating that writing is a process.

In this essay, I would like to discuss the various ways I use *V for Vendetta* in my course and my students' reactions, which are usually overwhelmingly positive. Moreover, I would like to explore the ways in which we as college instructors can develop courses that include uncommon literary texts to still achieve our teaching goals of improving students' reading comprehension, analytical thinking, and writing skills.

INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO A NEW MEDIUM

In their previous assigned readings, my students learn to respond to traditional literary texts such as novels and other media such as films, television episodes, scholarly journal articles, and popular magazine essays, but most have never encountered a graphic novel (with a few exceptions). As a result, I need to spend some time introducing them to the medium and appropriate reading strategies; however, as this is a composition course and not one on comics or graphic novels, I have to keep my discussion fairly basic. I usually use an essay by Charles McGrath entitled "Not Funnies" from the Longman writing textbook, *Beyond Words*.[4] The essay does a good job of giving some background information about the history of graphic novels and how they are structured/created, how graphic novelists view themselves and their work, including a bit about Alan Moore, and example pages from famous graphic novels such as *Ghost World* and *Pages*. At the same time, the essay ends with a somewhat condescending and, I think, somewhat inaccurate summation of the form, which McGrath refers to as a genre. McGrath states,

> The genre's greatest strength and greatest weakness is that no matter how far the graphic novel verges toward realism, its basic idiom is always a little, well cartoonish. Sacco's example notwithstanding, this is a medium probably not well suited to lyricism or strong emotion, and (again, Sacco excepted) the very best graphic novels don't take themselves entirely seriously. They appeal to that childish part of ourselves that delights in caricature, and they rely on the magic, familiar but always a little startling, that reliably turns some lines, dots and squiggles into a face or a figure. (313)

I ask my students to think about this idea and do a quick survey of whether they agree or disagree with McGrath's statement. Most of the time, the students are inclined to agree with him, although they are unwilling to put too much stake into their answers as they have no first-hand experience with graphic novels. I return to this quote at the end of the unit, and the students now overwhelmingly disagree with him and want to argue about the complexities of emotion and language and art in a text such as *V*.

[4] The essay was originally published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2004.

The first day we start discussing the text, I have the class look at the very first page of the story, included as Appendix 1. I always begin here with my students because it reveals not only the connection between text and image but also how each in its own right is incredibly detailed and significant to setting up the story. Moreover, the simple act of seeing a page of a graphic novel, which many of the students have no experience with, gives the students a chance to familiarize themselves with the form in a low-stakes environment. Rocco Versaci outlines a similar activity in his article, "Literary Literacy," in which he explains, "any given comic book panel contains a variety of information that must be processed, and the 'static' format allows a teacher to spend time focusing on analytical skills" (96). I agree that the focused attention we can give to the first page allows me to extract very detailed responses from my students. While Versaci focuses on one panel, I like to have my students look at the entire page, because it alerts them to the larger and interrelated context of each individual panel. For example, from the text, we learn the date (November 5, 1997), the fact that weather can be minutely predicted, the setting (London), and the fact that some areas are quarantined, food is being rationed, and terrorists are sent to detention centers.

From the images, we see Big Brother-esque cameras and surveillance equipment claiming "For your protection," checkpoints and police, and the introduction of two important characters, Evey and V. I ask the students to identify details in the last few frames that tell us something about these two characters, and after a stumbling start they pull out examples. They see Evey at a mirror putting on lipstick, which is usually a habit of adult women, but then they see the contrast of the stuffed teddy bear on her bed, which implies she is still a child. Then the students see the scene mirrored, literally, in the frame with V approaching his own vanity mirror. They point out the movie posters on the wall and different pieces of his costume waiting to be donned, revealing V's theatrical personality. They also talk about V's interest in the structure of society, demonstrated by the variety of books on his shelf, including Thomas More's *Utopia*, Karl Marx's *Capital*, and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. In addition, there is a shadow of a lion's head in the upper right corner of the frame, which one student very acutely (if tentatively) identified as the stone lion from London's Trafalgar Square – representing another one of V's attempts to preserve history and culture.

This examination of the first page is a scaffolding exercise I do with my class in which I can help to prepare them for reading the graphic novel in the detail that it deserves.[5] I continue to point out details they might have missed throughout the following weeks. For example, in one scene there is a *Les Miserables* poster in the background, and I point out the obvious connections that our story has to the French Revolution. This is particularly relevant to my class, because we talk extensively about the French Revolution when we read *The Scarlet Pimpernel* early in the semester. But this detail-oriented exercise also serves to warn the students that reading may take longer than they anticipate. *V* is fairly long and because of its unfamiliarity, we spend three weeks discussing it. The book itself makes this easy to do by being divided into three separate sections.

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[5] The idea that I can help students negotiate the gap between the skills they've learned previously and applying it to a particular text is based on Lev Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development.

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After giving the students a bit of background, we go over the nature of the comics medium itself – the intricate combination of text and image. As Nancy Allen explains, both words and images work "in a different but often collaborative way to make a contribution to our overall making of meaning" (17). We review the strategies we had used with previous texts for reading and watching. For example, we talk about analyzing language in the sense of diction or word choice, tone or voice, style, description, dialogue, punctuation, meanings and double meanings, connotations, etc. Then we talk about analyzing visual images in the sense of color, contrast, point of view, angle of vision, backgrounds and foregrounds, and focal points.[6] Then we brainstorm about how we can combine these two strategies to account for the hybrid genre of graphic novels.

Often, without any prompting from me, students are able to articulate the moments where words and images represent two different meanings and the contradiction provides a third, more subtle meaning. For example, the students immediately recognize the irony on page 2, wherein the picture shows Evey dressed as a prostitute while the written text claims "that is the face of London tonight." In addition, I usually give them some tips for reading, including taking notes, reading and looking at the images sequentially and simultaneously,[7] paying attention to the appearance of the written text, looking at the panels like a film, and examining the overall layout of the two-page spread. See Appendix 2 for the handout where I explain these moves in more detail.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

As our discussion of *V* progresses, I have the students participate in a variety of in-class activities and written homework assignments that push them to strengthen their critical thinking and writing skills. Moreover, I find that collaborative learning can challenge students to embrace the problems and benefits of working with others; or, as John Bean describes it, "collaborative learning promote[s] argumentation and consensus building" wherein in I create "an environment of productive talk that leads to greatly enriched inquiry, analysis, and argument" (150). Once during the semester, each student takes part in a group presentation in which they join three of their classmates to give a 15-25 minute group presentation about a text. Each student chooses an individual angle or topic to focus on, but overall the presentation should have some sort of coherence and minimal repetition. Some of the potential topics they can choose from include:

- What is the Historical/Social Context? – In what time period does the story occur? What is important about that time? How does it relate to the story?
- What other versions of the story are there? How do they differ? What might these differences mean?

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[6] These points of analysis for written texts and visual texts are taken from traditional modes of analyzing literature and photography.

[7] Lynell Burmark says in her essay on "Visual Literacy," words are sequential while images are simultaneous, "Words by their very nature are sequential, like a string of letters typed on a keyboard. Images, on the other hand, are simultaneous – everyone becomes part of the picture at the same time" (8). In reading graphic novels, the students have to utilize both.

- In what time period was this particular version of the story published or produced? Does that make a difference? Do you think you see the story differently than its original audience would have? Why?
- What are some of the major themes in the story? (Class/Gender/Tyranny/etc) Give examples from the text and explain their significance.
- What can we determine about the characters? Give a detailed character analysis of one or two characters using examples from the text.
- What do we know about the author of the text? Does this knowledge help our understanding of the text? How and why?
- What form is the text in? (Movie / Novel / Graphic Novel) How does that change or influence the telling of the story?
- If it is a movie, how do the sound and visual aspects affect our understanding of the story? If it is a novel, what stylistic elements do you notice? (Repetition/Metaphor/Dialogue/etc)
- What stood out to you in the story? Why? Do a close reading of a specific scene or an important word or phrase.
- What do scholars have to say about this story? Do you agree with them? Why or why not?

Most groups use PowerPoint or some sort of multimedia to make the presentation more engaging, such as movie clips, songs, and pictures along with their text. They create a handout for the class and end with 3-4 discussion questions that revolve around what they have presented. It *is* a writing class, so they turn in an essay version of their presentation as well. I usually have the groups present at the beginning of the sequences, so I don't inadvertently cover material in their presentations. *V for Vendetta* allows for a variety of contexts the students can explore, including when and where the novel was written (1980s England); or historical references such as Guy Fawkes, fascism, or the threat of Nuclear War; or the setting and background of the story - London 1997 – the future, where there was a recession in the 1980s, then nuclear war (Russia and Poland) resulting in Africa and Europe being wiped out, weather problems (floods, no food), riots and violence, no controlling government just gangs, fascists take power (and get rid of "Others"); or any number of themes including civil rights, governmental tyranny, rebellion/revolution, racism and xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, theatricality and performance, surveillance and protection, torture, vigilantism, scientific experimentation and ethics, religion/religious institutions and pedophilia, villainy and heroism, anarchy (as both destructive and creative), and freedom; or character or genre analysis; or current scholarship on *V* or graphic novels.

After we get into the novel and start discussing it in class, I often have the students answer some initial questions in writing to get the critical juices flowing, in addition to having them practice putting their ideas into writing. I ask questions such as: What similarities do you see between V and the Leader? What is the purpose of V's broadcast? How and in what way is Evey transformed? What do people do when no one is looking/listening (both generally and specifically in V)? How will the country fill the silence? How are women portrayed in the book? Some of these questions aim directly at reading comprehension, but others ask for more complex analysis and comparisons.

One of the group activities I have the students do is pick a particular scene they think is interesting and/or important, and then look closely and analyze one frame/panel/page for how the visual and text work together or contrast, and what details or gaps are revealed. This is very similar to activity I used to introduce the graphic novel, so the students already have some points of reference. Moreover, as Rocco Versaci says, by allowing students to choose their own scene to analyze, it "helps them to see themselves as active, interpretive readers" (97). The students then share their interpretation with the class, who respond with comments of their own. I also usually show a clip from the film adaptation of the novel to have them analyze another medium and discuss how it changes the meaning and what can or can't be done in particular genres or mediums. James Reynolds has a good essay on the comic-to-film adaptation of *V*, which I make available to the students via the university's online teaching tool (i.e. Blackboard).[8]

During each sequence, the students have to write several shorter writing assignments of approximately two pages. Some of the prompts I give them include:

- Analyze how V problematizes the dichotomy of hero/villain using at least two specific examples from the book.
- Throughout the semester, we have been making allusions to the similarities between some of the themes in the texts and current times. How do you relate the events and themes in *V for Vendetta* to modern life in America? Use specific examples from both *V* and life.

The latter question I always frame by having the students read a couple essays from a Longman topics reader titled *Citizenship Now*, including "Security versus Civil Liberties" by Richard Posner and "Protecting Dr. King's Legacy: Justice and Liberty in the Wake of September 11th" by Nadine Strossen. In both essays, the authors question whether issues of national security should take priority over civil liberties in the climate of our past and current "war on terrorism." I have the students compare the two positions and then discuss their own ideas. Then I guide them into a discussion of how these issues are portrayed in *V*.

Beyond connections to September 11th, *V* also offers a platform from which students can discuss a variety of current social and political issues.[9] The recent revolution in Egypt and the uprisings in the Middle East offer ideal real world connections to the novel and the question of whether anarchy is ever necessary. Similarly, recent high profile discussions of same-sex

[8] Students always find it interesting that Moore, who had stated that comics could stand on their own as an art form with 'the weight, depth, and moment of our stories', rejected the film adaptation of *V* (Reynolds 126, 130).

[9] Tony Williams's liberal-leaning article "Assessing *V for Vendetta*" points out many of the political issues the story reveals: "*V for Vendetta*'s England with its gay-bashing, spin doctoring news manipulation, Guantanamo Bay type concentration camps, and brutal authoritarian control really represents a dystopian version of contemporary America which is now continuing the legacy of Nazi Germany with suspension of civil liberties for suspected 'terrorists', illegal confinement, government surveillance in defiance of its Constitution, torture, humiliation, and murder of prisoners aided by the complicity of an apathetic population who are the twenty-first century's equivalent of Hitler's 'willing executioners'" (18).

marriage and the bullying of gay teens relate to underlying prejudices held by the fascist government in *V*. Even the ongoing attack on education, teachers, and the arts offer links to the ways in which V claims the government eradicated culture.

An activity that I have recently envisioned for the class is incorporating a current story from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Last fall at Washington State University, a student hacked into the university's media system and broadcast a video message reminiscent of V's in *V for Vendetta*. The student wore V's Guy Fawkes costume and even attempted to mimic his language while making a metaphorical argument about the students at the university.[10] I think that my students would benefit from watching this video message and analyzing the rhetoric used, such as the way he relies on the ethos of V as representative of necessary anarchy and criticism of the government and status quo. In addition, the appropriation of Guy Fawkes masks by some of the Occupy Wallstreet protesters is another contemporary example the students could examine.

STUDENT REACTIONS

I don't expect all of my students to become avid readers of graphic novels (although some do), but I do hope that they learn to appreciate how complex and engaging some kinds of popular culture can be.[11] I want them to continue to enjoy their movies and bestsellers, but I also want to prevent them from being passive receivers of information. I want them to be able to see popular culture (like graphic novels) as something that can be analyzed and ultimately reveal various ideological stances. As a short writing assignment, I have them write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper arguing for or against using graphic novels in the classroom; they can choose whether it is a high school or college classroom. In his essay "Seven Ways I Don't Teach Comics," Joseph Witek declares, "I don't ever apologize for comics" as number three. While I definitely do not apologize for using *V for Vendetta* or other texts considered popular culture, I do ask my students to consider why I would choose such a text and to consider why it is worthy of literary consideration. I ask them to think about it as a medium just like the others we examined. The last time I taught the course, every one of my students made an argument for using graphic novels in classrooms. Obviously, some of the students might have just been saying what they thought I wanted to hear (despite my assurance otherwise). However, my end of the semester course evaluations revealed that they really did enjoy the unit and learned from it (consistently over 80%), and for many it was their favorite text (usually over 50%). I have included below excerpts from sample letters two of my students wrote:

> Graphic novels often times have very deep and intellectual meanings and educate the reader in history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and even literature and poetry. Although I am not questioning the educational value of classic literature, I do believe that we are at a point and time in our society where modern, perhaps more appealing, forms of

[10] He overtly discusses squirrels on campus, but clearly he is using this as a metaphor for student apathy.

[11] Usually by the end of our discussion about *V*, many students want to revise either their definition of "popular culture" or whether graphic novels should be considered popular culture with its connotations of "low art."

> literature should be tied into schools curriculums… The main character is based upon the British historical figure of Guy Fawkes, who tried to blow up the parliament. Inspired by Fawkes, V sets the Parliament ablaze on the same exact date, November 5th. Also, the concentration camps, and entire conflict between government and populous can be traced back to the fascist Nazi regime, upon which Norsefire is based. Simply by knowing these facts it becomes apparent how history, political conflict, and sociological ideas play a dominant role in the graphic novel. Also, nearly all characters undergo a psychological transformation, like Evey Hammond: from uneducated teenager to a legacy-carrying symbol of justice and freedom. V psychologically breaks down Evey in order to rebuild her. Furthermore, V is one of the most articulate and intelligent characters I have ever encountered.[12] (Student 1)

> As the term suggests, graphic novels are novels presented in the form of dialogues, narrative, and illustrated visuals; they present an order to the story with developments in plots and characters like traditional novels. Though Americans tend to think that graphic novels are merely simplistic comics with no educational value, Europeans and the Japanese honor the genre as being more than entertainment. In addition, a comic is textually and visually distinct from a graphic novels in the complexity of the form; graphic novels require sophisticated reading as graphic novels work elaborately as a whole with every detail intentionally placed for scholastic interpretation (NCTE). (Student 2)

What I want to point out in the letters is that (whether or not it was in fact their personal opinion) they recognized (with varying degrees of sophistication) what graphic novels, particularly *V for Vendetta*, have to offer. The students mention history, philosophy, psychology, language, illustrations, and the increasing legitimization of graphic novels by institutions. I really could not ask for more since they obviously see how and why I am using this particular text (which may not initially seem very academic) to fulfill our course goals and make them more critical writers and thinkers.

CONCLUSIONS

Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher ask in the introduction to their edited volume, *Teaching Visual Literacy*, "Do comic books and graphic novels constitute an appropriate genre for classroom instruction?" (2). As the purpose of their book, Frey and Fisher obviously answer this question in the affirmative. However, for my composition classroom and the administrators of the program, the answer is not so obvious. Yet when I point out that "as with reading comprehension, visually literate learners are able to make connections, determine importance, synthesize information, evaluate, and critique. Further, these visual literacies are interwoven with textual ones, so that their interaction forms the basis for a more complete understanding" (Frey and Fisher 1), I can easily make connections between graphic novels and the English department outcomes for my course. In addition, our students are constantly being bombarded with visual images, from billboards to movies to the Internet, and I want to prevent them passively accepting

[12] All misspellings and grammatical problems are the students'; I have copied their language verbatim. Permission granted by students for use of letters.

everything they encounter. As Catherine L. Hobbs argues, "to condone and contribute to visual illiteracy contradicts our purpose of teaching effective and ethical written communication" (55). Students need to learn to critically interpret and respond to the variety of written, visual, and hybrid texts they encounter every day not just the "academic" texts we provide for them. In fact, Rocco Versaci claims that the "densely packed" Internet sites our students go to for information, "ask readers to move their eyes diagonally and up and down in addition to side to side - the same kind of movements that come with reading comic book panels and pages" (97).

For some, it might seem unusual to have students use popular culture (such as movies and graphic novels) in a writing class, but by connecting the rhetorical strategies I and the UNM English Department want them to learn with things they experience and enjoy in their everyday life (such as visual images and dramatic story telling), I make the skills more real and more useful to them. So while I hope that my students have fun, it is not, of course, my primary goal. I strongly believe that if they start to see how critical thinking and writing skills can be used beyond traditional academic papers, they will be more likely to see their usefulness in other situations and contexts. As graphic narratives gain more and more traction as a useful tool for teaching different forms of literacy, I hope to continue encouraging my students to search below the surface in order to reach the complexities of *V for Vendetta*. Or, as my student so succinctly put it, I hope to help them to continue to "learn stuff!"

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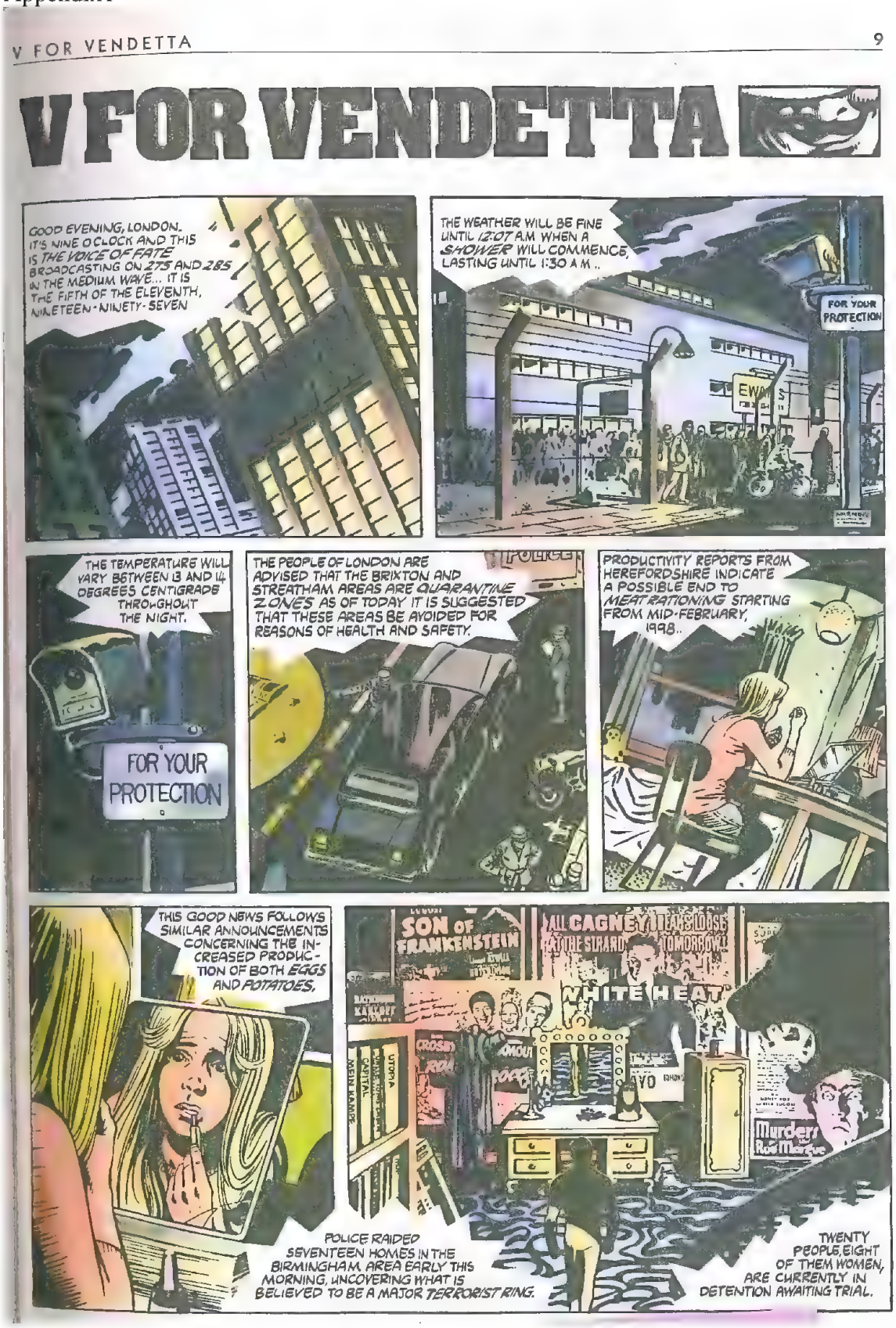
Appendix 1


V FOR VENDETTA 9
V FOR VENDETTA
GOOD EVENING, LONDON. IT'S NINE O'CLOCK AND THIS IS THE VOICE OF FATE BROADCASTING ON 275 AND 285 IN THE MEDIUM WAVE... IT IS THE FIFTH OF THE ELEVENTH, NINETEEN-NINETY-SEVEN
THE WEATHER WILL BE FINE UNTIL 12:07 A.M. WHEN A SHOWER WILL COMMENCE, LASTING UNTIL 1:30 A.M..
FOR YOUR PROTECTION
THE TEMPERATURE WILL VARY BETWEEN 13 AND 14 DEGREES CENTIGRADE THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT.
FOR YOUR PROTECTION
THE PEOPLE OF LONDON ARE ADVISED THAT THE BRIXTON AND STREATHAM AREAS ARE QUARANTINE ZONES. AS OF TODAY IT IS SUGGESTED THAT THESE AREAS BE AVOIDED FOR REASONS OF HEALTH AND SAFETY.
POLICE
PRODUCTIVITY REPORTS FROM HEREFORDSHIRE INDICATE A POSSIBLE END TO MEAT RATIONING STARTING FROM MID-FEBRUARY, 1998..
THIS GOOD NEWS FOLLOWS SIMILAR ANNOUNCEMENTS CONCERNING THE INCREASED PRODUCTION OF BOTH EGGS AND POTATOES.
SON OF FRANKENSTEIN
JAMES CAGNEY
WHITE HEAT
UTOPIA
MEIN KAMPF
Murders
POLICE RAIDED SEVENTEEN HOMES IN THE BIRMINGHAM AREA EARLY THIS MORNING, UNCOVERING WHAT IS BELIEVED TO BE A MAJOR TERRORIST RING.
TWENTY PEOPLE, EIGHT OF THEM WOMEN, ARE CURRENTLY IN DETENTION AWAITING TRIAL.

Appendix 2

Tips for Reading *V for Vendetta*

Our next unit involves a medium many of you are probably unfamiliar with - the graphic novel. I've included below some tips for reading, many of which are repeats from previous texts but several that are specific to graphic novels.

- **Take notes**
  Just as you have done for previous texts, take notes in the book itself and/or in your notebook. Mark (highlight/underline) places in the text that you think are important, that you don't understand, or that evoke some kind of emotional response from you. For example, I might put a smiley face next to a line or scene I find funny, or I might write a brief note to myself about a scene that relates to a theme I've seen elsewhere in the text or even in other texts we've read. With a longer text, it is often difficult to remember exactly what you read the night before, so taking notes is crucial.

- **Read and look at the images sequentially and simultaneously**
  Words require sequential reading. For example, you read left to right in order, one word after the other. In contrast, images are usually read simultaneously. For instance, you take in everything in an image at once. You will need to do both with a graphic novel. (Lynell Burmark "Visual Literacy" 8)

- **Pay attention to the appearance of the written text**
  Written text can sometimes indicate motion or sound or feeling. For example, a bubble containing the word "NOOOOOOOOOO" (page 35 in *V*) obviously suggests a long, drawn out yell or moan. The fact that the word contains nine extra O's emphasizes the strong feeling.

- **Look at the panels like a film**
  As we did when watching *Star Wars* or *Buffy*, consider where the director places the camera. In other words, how is the scene framed and what is the focal point. Are we looking up, down, from a distance, close-up, or from behind? For example, in the same frame mentioned above on page 35, we see an extreme close-up of Lewis Prothero, in which he is sweating and his eyes and mouth are open wide. This image, just as the written text does, suggests extreme personal emotion.

- **Examine the overall layout of the two-page spread**
  Look at each frame, then the panel, then the entire page and two-page spread, noting the contrast or blending of panels. We will practice this in class, but think about things such as the size of the frames, how many there are in each row, whether the frames show the same setting or jump to a different setting, the similarity or difference in color choices, and whether they indicate movement.

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Issue 2 *Teaching the Works of Alan Moore*

Article 5

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Rationale for V for Vendetta

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V for Vendetta

By Alan Moore and David Lloyd with Steve Whitaker and Siobhan Dodds

Rationale by Susan Spangler, SUNY-Fredonia

Grade Level and Audience

V for Vendetta is recommended for high school readers in English, history, or government classes.

Plot Summary

Moore paints a bleak picture of a futuristic London in the opening scenes of *V for Vendetta*. In Book 1, "Europe After the Reign," England is slowly recovering from war. A fascist government led by Adam Susan and "Fate," a computer, has an iron grip on the country. Susan relies on his government ministers (whose agencies are named for body parts) to squash any sort of rebellion. These include Derek Almond, head of The Finger (police); and Eric Finch, head of The Nose (investigations).

Fighting against the fascists is V, a being of superhuman speed, agility, grace, and cunning. As readers eventually learn, V was held in Larkhill concentration camp and given experimental drugs that gave him extraordinary power but which killed all of V's fellow prisoners. After escaping from Larkhill, V seeks revenge on his captors and the government that held him. He begins by blowing up the Houses of Parliament on November 5, an allusion to Guy Fawkes' Gunpowder Plot of 1605. It is during the explosion that V rescues Evey Hammond, a munitions worker being attacked by Fingermen, and takes her to his home, the Shadow Gallery.

V quickly and efficiently dispatches his enemies. Lewis Prothero, former Larkhill concentration camp commander and the "Voice of Fate," is driven insane when V burns his collectible dolls before his eyes. V forces Bishop Anthony Lilliman, former Larkhill spiritual advisor, to ingest a cyanide-laced communion wafer. Delia Surridge, the doctor who conducted the drug experiments, is injected with poison as she sleeps.

Book 2, "This Vicious Cabaret," concentrates on Evey Hammond's character development. As V's houseguest, Evey has learned much from V but wonders about her role in V's plans. V surprises Evey by releasing her, and she begins living with Gordon Deitrich, a small-time bootlegger. Gordon is killed by another petty criminal, and Evey seeks revenge by trying to gun the killer down. She is thwarted and captured, though, apparently by government authorities. Evey is routinely tortured for information on V, though she refuses to reveal anything. In her cell, she begins receiving notes, ostensibly from another prisoner, Valerie, who writes her autobiography on toilet paper and somehow sneaks it to Evey. Though Valerie was tortured, she remained strong, clinging to the one inch of her that the government could not take, and her words hearten Evey as she faces the same treatment. When Evey chooses to die rather than sign a false confession, she is suddenly set free by the guard. She wanders out of the prison and into the Shadow Gallery, where she realizes that her prison ordeal was an illusion orchestrated by V

"because [he] wanted to set [her] free." Evey struggles with, but ultimately accepts her freedom, transformed by the prison experience. V hints that Evey will have a part in his "finale."

Book 3, "The Land of Do-As-You-Please," brings together the disparate threads of the narrative into a satisfying conclusion. V detonates several bombs around London and announces that the citizens will not be watched or listened to for three days. The leader, Susan, is convinced to take a motorcade through the streets to calm the people. Finch, on V's trail throughout the book, correctly guesses V's hiding place in Victoria Station. Susan is gunned down in the motorcade just as Finch shoots and mortally wounds V in the subway. He stumbles back to the Shadow Gallery to die in Evey's arms, and when she realizes that V has prepared her to take his place, Evey gladly accepts his mantle, appearing at midnight as V. In the explosions that follow, Finch's assistant, Dominic Stone, is wounded and taken back to the Shadow Gallery by Evey, ostensibly to begin his training as the next V. Finch, by this time the only remaining government minister, wanders off into the night, alone.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

As with most adolescent literature, *V for Vendetta* deals with identity issues. Investigators hunt for V's real identity throughout the narrative, and Evey also struggles with that issue throughout her prison ordeal and again when she takes up V's cause. The bigger issue, of course, is that V isn't really a person. V is an idea, and "you can't kill an idea."

This novel capitalizes on American tropes (interesting that it is written by a Brit and set in England) that students will readily identify with, the underdog and the fight against injustice. Much like Atticus Finch, V is an underdog. How can one being possibly fight against a system of injustice? Can one person win against incredible odds? The idea of fighting against fascist governments has been a mainstay in American fiction since before the American Revolution and is continued today by the recent Tea Party movement. Thomas Jefferson hinted that governments need to undergo revolution every twenty years, and it is clear in *V for Vendetta* that revolution is needed for England.

With that trope comes the question of a responsible and humane government's role in the daily lives of its citizens. The idea of individual freedoms balanced against society's needs is prevalent throughout the narrative. What makes someone free is also a main issue that Evey Hammond and Eric Finch deal with.

V's character is certainly a strength of the text. Readers will be drawn to V's incredible speed, agility, wisdom, and composure. Though not one with superhero powers, V is certainly a superhuman. Teachers might also draw on V's use of allusion throughout the text. References to classic literature such as to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and William Blake's poetry are topped only by pop culture references to "Sympathy for the Devil" by the Rolling Stones and a children's book by Enid Blyton. Like all effective allusions, they add meaning and depth to this work, and teachers will want to spend some time unpacking them.

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Possible Objections

In U.S. school systems, social institutions that thrive on order, absolute submission to stated rules, and authority, a novel in which anarchy is promoted and romanticized may prove problematic. V advocates responsible citizenry in an anarchy, though, and students could be encouraged to think critically about rules (or lack thereof) and their effect on social order.

V's complex and compelling character may also present a problem for teachers. V is a moral character, but his morals do not coincide with those of the mainstream government. He kills people, justifiably in his mind, yet he is labeled a "terrorist." Is murder justified if it is committed against fascists? This question is one that teachers are likely to ask their students.

Violent images of explosions and murder as well as frontal nudity run throughout the book and may upset readers. Sub-plotlines also involve issues of prostitution, domestic violence, pedophilia, sexual orientation, mental cruelty, and extra-marital sex, which will certainly raise eyebrows for some readers (and their parents). Given the plot lines in canonical literature, however, teachers may be able to minimize objections with references to well-accepted works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*.

Ideas for Implementation

Teachers might begin by having students investigate (perhaps through a webquest) Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Understanding Fawkes' motivation for trying to destroy the House of Lords will facilitate a discussion on the need for elections and other opportunities for opposition to the standing government to be heard. The recent revolution in Egypt or Thomas Jefferson's famous quote, "God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion," in regards to Shay's Rebellion, are other examples teachers could draw on to show why change to government may be necessary or even advocated. Which countries in the world have political systems in which there is healthy political opposition to the current government leaders? Which do not? What are the qualities of a healthy political system?

Throughout their reading, students could be encouraged to draw connections between the government in *V for Vendetta* and other governments, fictitious or real. What can students learn specifically about the government in the narrative that they find oppressive? Students could also investigate various people/groups that have shown their resistance to governments throughout history (Sinn Fein, Greenpeace, the PLO, Thoreau, Gandhi, M.L. King, "Braveheart") and report on the success of these people/groups as a larger project or as part of a culminating assessment.

Teachers may also want students to independently investigate the allusions throughout *V for Vendetta*. They might choose from those in a complete list, compiled at http://www.enjolrasworld.com/Annotations/Alan%20Moore/V%20for%20Vendetta/V%20for%20Vendetta%20Revised%20-%20Complete.html

Because "you can't kill an idea," students might want to continue the story with Evey acting as V and Stone as the apprentice. Students could speculate on England's future without a central

government and use the graphic genre or a storyboard as a medium for expressing their predictions. Will a new government rise? Could a true anarchy work? What will the new V's role be in England's future? Students could answer these questions and more in their predictions.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

Because *V for Vendetta* focuses on an oppressive government/dystopia, novels such as *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World* or *The Giver* could be appropriately paired with it. *Hamlet* also elicits quite a few comparisons using a revenge theme, search for identity, and evil government leaders. If used in a history or government class, discussions on the current Tea Party movement would be in order, or it could be paired with *Persepolis* to contrast *V* with a non-fiction account of an oppressive government and a revolution *toward* fascism rather than away from it.

Awards

2006 Prometheus Award, for libertarian science fiction.

Reviews

"This was Alan Moore's first major comics work, and it paired him with David Lloyd, an artist with a brooding (if occasionally murky), realist style that emphasizes the drab nature of this dystopian future. The result of their collaboration is an intriguing but flawed work. " – Darren Latta, contributing editor, UGO Entertainment

"…at the core of things, *V for Vendetta* is about the ideas it presents. In a three-book arc, Moore creates a cinematic story that entertains and, more importantly, will leave readers questioning their ideals for years after the last chapter is read. It is another fantastic entry into the world of subversive comics by the industry's best. – William Jones, GraphicNovelReporter

This book has an eloquence and beauty to it, stemming from both the writing and the artwork, both of which are at the peak of their craft. The book remains one of Alan Moore's finest works, no mean feat considering we consider Moore to be up there amongst the all-time best writers to grace comics with their work." – Grovel, graphic novel reviews

Resources/References

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Article 6

1-1-2011

Rationale for Watchmen

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Watchmen

By Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

Rationale by John C. Weaver, Williamsport Area High School (Williamsport, Pennsylvania)

Grade Level and Audience

Watchmen is recommended for mature high school junior and senior English classes.

Plot Summary

In 1985, in an alternate United States, Nixon is still president and the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan, driving the Soviets and the Americans to the brink of nuclear war. Against this backdrop, the masked vigilante Rorschach, wanted by the police for his murder of several criminals, investigates the homicide of another former vigilante, the Comedian.

Rorschach warns several other masked adventurers, whose activities were outlawed in the wake of the police strike of 1977, that their lives may be in danger: Dan Dreiberg (the Nite Owl), Laurie Juspeczyk (Silk Specter), Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias), and Jon Osterman (Dr. Manhattan). The former superheroes do not take Rorschach's warnings seriously.

But soon, an assassination attempt is made against Adrian's life; Dr. Manhattan, the novel's only superpowered being and America's main nuclear deterrent, leaves Earth for Mars after being accused of causing cancer in his old friends; and Rorschach is set up for the murder of a retired supervillain and arrested.

As tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union escalate and nuclear war becomes a more distinct possibility, Dan and Laurie don their old costumes and continue Rorschach's investigation. They break Rorschach out of prison, and Laurie tries to convince her old lover, Dr. Manhattan, to save the world from nuclear holocaust while Dan and Rorschach trace the web of conspiracy to its center.

By the end, we learn many secrets: about Laurie's relationship to the dead Comedian and about Adrian's plan to avert nuclear war and remake the world in his own image. Dan, Rorschach, and Laurie could not face a more dangerous opponent than Adrian Veidt.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Watchmen, with its rich language, its complex and interwoven themes, and the interplay between words and images, is the *Hamlet* of graphic novels. A critique of the comic book superhero, *Watchmen* serves to question our notions of what is heroic. In addition to the graphic storyline, Moore adds at the end of the first eleven chapters a variety of

prose genres, including memoire, magazine profiles, business letters, advertising copy, and political propaganda, which allows a teacher to examine the conventions of a wide range of genres.

Perhaps most fascinating is Moore and Gibbons' comic within a comic. Similar to *Hamlet's* Mousetrap play, *Tales from the Black Freighter* is a *Watchmen* in miniature, which intensifies and expands upon the themes in the larger novel.

Possible Objections

Violence and sex are depicted graphically in *Watchmen*. In terms of violence, the fight scenes include large amounts of blood, and the final attack on New York shows streets filled with bloody dead bodies. Gibbons and Moore chose to create such a graphic depiction in the last chapter to highlight the consequences of Adrian Veidt's plan to save the world by destroying Manhattan. It contrasts with his exalted image of a world of peace, love, and cooperation between nations.

Sexuality, which is sometimes graphically depicted, appears either as a degrading activity or an expression of deep personal connection. There are representations of prostitution, mainly through silhouette, and references to some costumed heroes who are attracted to the lifestyle for reasons that are decidedly sexual. *Watchmen* also represents the attempted rape of a female superhero. On the other hand, the sex depicted between Dan and Laurie is presented as positive and tender, two people reaching out to each other.

Watchmen also contains adult language. As well, some may see Dr. Manhattan as a God figure or find problems in the texts' suggestion that God does not exist. The text also expresses a range of political views, from conservative to liberal. It critiques all of them, but some many find concern with some characters' beliefs or ethics. While it explores many mature themes, Watchmen is not a text that offers answers so much as it offers multiple critiques and raises questions of every form: moral, historic, philosophical, political, religious, etc.

Ideas for Implementation

TEACHING THE FORM OF COMICS

Although a number of students will have read comics before, far more will have little experience with graphic fiction. You may wish to introduce the form by examining simple one to four panel newspaper strips, such as *Dilbert*, *Peanuts*[1], *Bloom County*[2], and so on. Most students will have read newspaper strips and will feel comfortable with the form. You may discuss the interplay of text and image and the flow from panel to panel to prepare them for the complexity of graphic novels.

To further prepare students for *Watchmen*, consider teaching Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, particularly chapter 3, which examines the different types of

transitions from panel to panel. Applying McCloud's ideas to the newspaper strips would be useful for your students to understand how comics work in the small scale before moving to a full graphic novel.

CREATING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Watchmen, written in the 1980s and located in that particular historical moment, requires some prior knowledge of the Cold War. So that the class may understand the novel, small group research projects, leading to class presentations, effectively transmit the necessary background knowledge students will need to fully appreciate the novel. Such topics may include the Manhattan Project, the Soviet/U.S. arms race, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Bernard Goetz (as an example of vigilantism), and other topics you find relevant to the text.

TRACING THE THEMES OF *WATCHMEN*

While your students read *Watchmen*, as with any other text, they should watch out for questions that emerge, including what makes a character heroic or criminal. Some characters, like Rorschach and the Comedian, appear more violent than the criminals they battle. A corollary idea to consider in their reading is what constitutes justice, and can a vigilante really represent justice? By the end of the story, when Adrian Veidt kills millions of New Yorkers to avert worldwide nuclear catastrophe, your students may engage in a lively debate as to whether the ends ever justify the means.

Those who choose to examine the more philosophical side of the novel should consider the questions raised by Dr. Manhattan. This character experiences time as simultaneous: Dr. Manhattan sees his past, present, and future as a single time. Though he foresaw the Kennedy assassination, he did nothing to stop it, because to him it was something that already happened. Students may find it useful to discuss whether the future is predetermined, or if we have the power to shape our destiny. If the former is true, then what happens to our sense of personal responsibility?

Of course, one must also consider the graphic aspects of *Watchmen*. Not only does the art clarify the emotions inscribed in the dialogue, but Moore and Gibbons also use dialogue from one conversation and juxtapose it with the action of another scene. The pirate comic, *Tales of the Dark Freighter*, has particular relevance to the main action of *Watchmen*. The Mariner in the comic is shipwrecked and the pirates who attacked his ship are threatening his hometown. To save his wife and children, he must try to get home, and the horrors he faces along the way have deep connections to both Rorschach's and Adrian Veidt's story.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

Fundamentally, *Watchmen* is a critique of the heroic ideal. In western civilization, we often see the hero as a individual who is stronger, braver, and often more intelligent than

the rest of us. They represent the highest ideals of their culture. *Watchmen* examines a twentieth century ideal of the hero—the superhero—and questions the whole idea of heroism. The costumed adventurers believe that they are there to protect society, but instead, many are either more violent than the criminals they fight or they are ineffectual. Nearly all dress up in costume for their own agendas, and not for the good of society. Therefore, *Watchmen* would work very well in a unit on the heroic idea. Braiding the critique of heroism in Moore and Gibbon's novel with texts like *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland*, or *The Odyssey*, which represent typical western heroic ideas, would be a useful exercise. The reason such a unit would be particularly powerful is that once your students look at the self-serving nature of the hero in *Watchmen*, they may identify the same flaws in Beowulf, Roland, or Odysseus. *Watchmen* has the tendency to make all stories of heroes look like critiques of the heroic ideal.

Another, very different, unit would be one on dystopias. Novels like *Brave New World*, *1984*, and *The Giver* have some connections to *Watchmen*. The graphic novel exists in an alternate United States in 1985, where costumed adventurers exist and attempt to make the world a better place, and generally fail miserably. The other dystopic novels also illustrate the horrible societies that result from the attempt to make the world a better place.

Awards

1988 Hugo Award[3]
1988 Eisner Award for Best Finite Series[4]
1988 Eisner Award for Best Writer: Alan Moore

Resources/References

General:
The annotated *Watchmen*, A chapter-by-chapter Guide:
http://www.capnwacky.com/rj/watchmen/chapter1.html

Watchmen Companion Reader: http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/hypertexts/wm/watch.cfm

Watchmen at Wikipedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watchmen#Publication_and_reception

Academic Articles:
Brandy Ball Blake's "Watchmen: The Graphic Novel as Trauma Fiction":
http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5_1/blake/

Mark Bernard and James Bucky Carter's "Alan Moore and the Graphic novel: Confronting the Fourth Dimension:
http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/carter/

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Teaching The Text:
James Bucky Carter's "Teaching Watchmen in the Wake of 9/11" in *Teaching the Graphic Novel:* http://www.mla.org/store/CID44/PID390

John Weaver Teaches *Watchmen* to High Schoolers:
http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/who-teaches-watchmen-op-ed and
http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/reteaching-watchmen-op-ed

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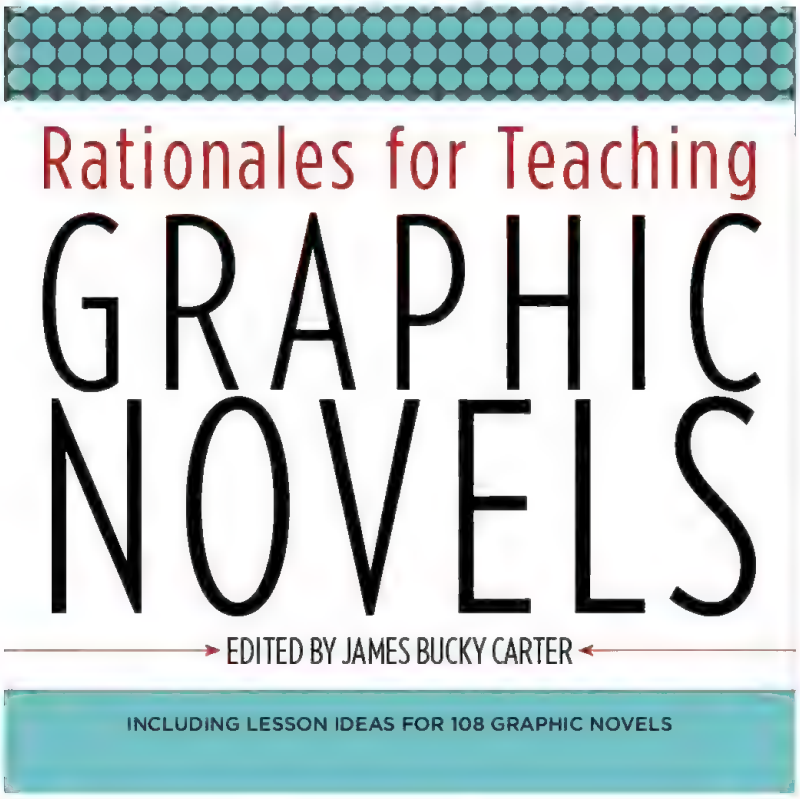
[1] http://www.comics.com/ This site offers many different comic strips to choose from to introduce students to graphic storytelling.

[2] http://www.berkeleybreathed.com/pages/favorite_strips.asp
[3] http://www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-history/1998-hugo-awards-2/
[4] http://www.comic-con.org/cci/cci_eisners_pastwinners.php - 1988

For rationales for teaching 107 more graphic novels, see this resource:



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Volume 1
Issue 2 *Teaching the Works of Alan Moore*

Article 7

1-1-2011

Rationale for Saga of the Swamp Thing, Volume 1

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Saga of the Swamp Thing: Book One

By Alan Moore, Steve Bissette, and John Totlebon

Rationale by James Bucky Carter, the University of Texas at El Paso

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for high school English classes.

Plot Summary

This volume features the first scripts celebrated writer Alan Moore penned for the award-winning comic book series by the same title (issues #20-27). In the first story, Swamp Thing mourns the death of Arcane, an adversary and relative of good friend Abigail "Abby" Cable. Seeing Arcane as a defining foil, Swamp Thing feels that whereas he had his humanity taken from him when his body suffered an explosion and was subsequently decomposed by the Louisiana swamps in which he worked as scientist Alec Holland, Arcane was born human and then worked to remove his humanity by becoming a powerful but grotesque foe. Meanwhile, the Sunderland corporation makes plans to kill Swamp Thing and all who know of his existence.

The second story arc shows Sunderland's attempt to make good on its plan, with Lizabeth Tremayne and lover Dennis Barclay talking over their relationship and barely escaping death from Sunderland's goons. Abby and husband Matt Cable have relationship troubles stemming from Abby's devotion to Alec and Matt's growing use of magic and alcohol. Swamp Thing is confronted by Sunderland operatives, shot, frozen, and delivered to Sunderland's leader, Mr. Sunderland himself. Mr. Sunderland employs Jason Woodrue, a deranged botanist and recently released criminal, to study the corpse. Woodrue, also known as the villain the Floronic Man, a human-vegetable hybrid, learns that Holland did not transform into Swamp Thing, as was previously thought, but, rather, Holland's consciousness infected or possessed existing plant life in the swamp, which then attempted to recreate a human form based on the memories of the possessing cognizance.

Woodrue plans Sunderland's murder; new vegetation stems from a thawed Swamp Thing, reanimating him, and Woodrue follows Swamp Thing back to the swamp. There, Woodrue roots the creature's body to the earth and uses Swamp Thing's ability to connect with "the green" (all the world's vegetation) to connect himself to it and listen to its wishes. Woodrue interprets that the green seeks revenge on humanity for destroying so much of it, and he goes on a rampage through several small towns before revealing to the world that he is forcing plants to produce ten times the oxygen they usually emit, which will ultimately end in the death of humanity. The remaining essence of Alec Holland searches for identity and comes to terms that it no longer truly represents the soul of Holland but something different. Swamp Thing, embracing his unique identity, learns of Woodrue's plans, notices how the deranged man has twisted the true desires of the green, and defeats what turns out to be a much more appropriate foil than Arcane ever was.

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The final arc features Abby's new job at Baton Rouge's Elysium Lawns Center for autistic Children. Paul, a teenage resident, must spell things correctly and asks others to do so, does not like to be touched, and draws pictures of a white demon he calls the monkey king. He feels that misspelling leads to death. The monkey king is actually a demon that feeds off of fear. It was released when Paul's parents misspelled a word while innocently playing with a Ouija board. The demon seeks Paul as his master and torments him and the other children. The mystic Jason Blood senses the monster's presence and visits to dispose of it. Blood reveals to Abby that he shares his body with the hero/anti-hero known as Etrigan the Demon and helps Abby, Swamp Thing, and Paul defeat the monkey king. Paul overcomes his fear, causing the monkey king to shrink. Etrigan then eats the shrunken beast. During the foray, Abby's drunken husband stops using his magic to create scenarios where Abby is paying him what he feels is adequate amounts and types of attention and drives to help in the battle. He crashes the car and is mortally injured, however, and is approached by a large insect that offers a deal that will keep him alive.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Saga of the Swamp Thing is a well-crafted, multi-faceted narrative that combines the magical realism with literal ecological concerns like few other works of any kind. Moore's writing is powerful and exquisite; the art creates mood, pitch, and tenor exactly in line with the scripting. The Swamp Thing creature offers opportunities for exploring humanity and its connection to land *and* fellow man.

Possible Objections

There are several suggested sexual situations, but no actual nudity or intercourse is ever shown. Lizabeth Tremayne and Dennis Barclay talk about a one-night stand they have shared; Matt Cable discusses his sexual frustration with wife Abby and concocts magic images of her in lingerie and at one time levitates some of her clothing to create a "ghost image" of her. He asks the floating clothing to "get on your knees and apologize," which may be read as a directive for oral sex and/or as general misogynistic behavior, but it is understood that Cable is not well mentally, and any reference to sex must be inferred from the reader. None are direct and no vulgar language is used to describe any sexual act. One child from Elysium Lawns charges at Abby. He does not wear clothes but his leg is raised to cover his private parts. The most overt possible objections might stem from depictions of Southerners as simple or successful businessmen as untrustworthy and crazed or from the many allusions to mysticism, magic, devils and demons.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

There are many texts that illustrate the land or nature reacting to the poor decisions of humanity, such as the Arthurian Legends, or Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, and *Richard III,*

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just as it does in this graphic novel. Swamp Thing's appearance was always meant to inspire thoughts of Frankenstein's monster, and pairing the title featuring a lumbering pseudo-human's search for his place in the world and among humans could make for a great pairing with the Shelley novel. The mix of mysticism, strange drama and a Southern setting suggests that book can be read as an example of Southern gothic literature and could be used with select writings from William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, and Eudora Welty. *Saga of the Swamp* Thing may be seen as an excellent example of the grotesque via irony: Swamp Thing is the flinch-inducing monster, but he often helps those that have fallen victim to actual hideous behavior from human beings. This volume's strong focus on ecology ties the book to many exemplary novels such as M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, *Eva* by Peter Dickinson, and Eric Campbell's *The Place of the Lions*. [1]

Ideas for Implementation

One might begin discussing *Saga of the Swamp Thing* simply by asking students to brainstorm thoughts on an illustration of the hero. The one hyperlinked herein[2] depicts the creature seemingly at one with nature. Ask students to discuss what the image represents to them and how it may or may not match up with ideas of heroism, monstrosities, and/or ecology.

Awards

1985 Kirby Award for Best Writing
1986 Kirby Award for Best Writing
1985 Kirby Award for Best Continuing Series
1986 Kirby Award for Best Continuing Series
1987 Jack Kirby Award for Best Continuing Series[3]
(These awards are for the series, not necessarily for the specific issues presented in *Saga of the Swamp Thing: Book* 1, which reprints work originally published in 1984)

Reviews

"Perhaps the brainiest and scariest horror narrative of the '80s" – *Rolling Stone.*

"…a brilliant, cerebral, and challenging piece of art" – John Hogan, Graphic Novel Reporter.[4]

"Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is an undeniable classic of modern comics. It's a creative run that absolutely should be read by all." – Jesse Sheedeen, *IGN*[5]

Resources/References

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[1] http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring96/schwarz.html
[2] http://www.comicsbulletin.com/vertigo/images/0809/swamptpb.jpg
[3] http://www.hahnlibrary.net/comics/awards/kirby.php
[4] http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/saga-swamp-thing-book-1-review
[5] http://comics.ign.com/articles/954/954448p1.html

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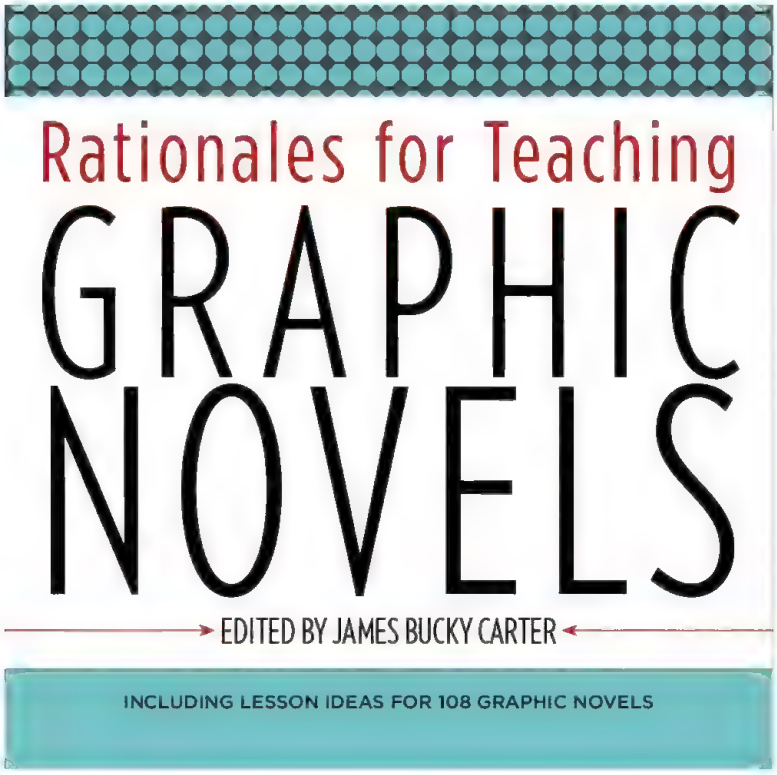

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Volume 1
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Article 8

1-1-2011

Review of Di Liddo's Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel

Orion Ussner Kidder
Simon-Fraser University/Fairleigh Dickinson University- Vancouver

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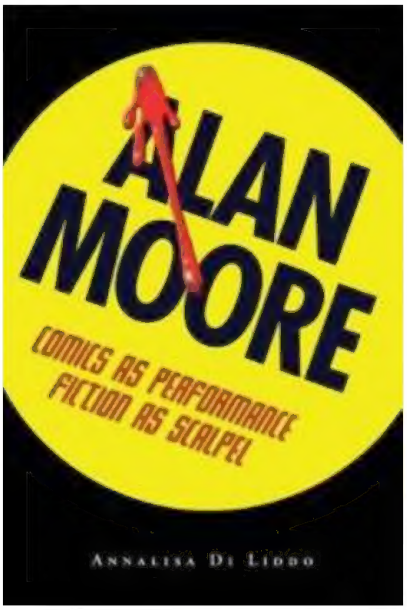

Review of Annalisa Di Liddo's
Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel

By Orion Ussner Kidder, Simon Fraser University/
Fairleigh Dickinson University-Vancouver

Di Liddo's *Comics as Performance* is best understood as a collection of intriguing chapters rather than one whole argument. The volume proceeds in four chapters with a short but interesting introduction and an equally brief conclusion. Taken individually, all of these discussions are genuinely interesting and critically sound, but the whole volume does not necessarily add up to one, singular conclusion.

The introduction employs the term "graphic novel" to refer to certain of Moore's books (e.g., *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Promethea*, *From Hell*, etc.) and then spends several dense pages reviewing previous attempts at defining the term to demonstrate why she has chosen it. The result is a useful discussion of the issues, largely formal and industrial, pertaining to the term, and a new definition that she synthesises from statements made by, among others, Sabin, Spiegelman, Eisner, Campbell, Moore himself, Baetens, Harvey, and Hatfield (15-21). The upshot is a definition that consists of three criteria: "thematic unity, large structure, and cohesiveness (21). Roughly speaking, these criteria refer to the notion that a graphic novel must articulate a coherent set of ideas that add up to a singular theme, have a degree of narrative complexity, and, finally, contain some kind of narrative structure that, perhaps only implicitly, involves one form or another of closure. The definition itself is somewhat based on questions of quality, which are always a bit subjective, but such is the nature of these kinds of definitions. The

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definition is, thus, more useful as an applied theory than as objective truth, which makes sense given that its function is to propose a way of looking at Moore's books.

The first chapter contains an overview of Moore's formalism in terms of the comic-book form itself, self-reflexivity, and revisionist superheroes, an appropriate if by-the-numbers approach. The second chapter contains three, in effect, close readings on the theme of the Bakhtinian chronotope in *Halo Jones*, *From Hell*, and *Promethea*. If nothing else, this chapter actually examines *Halo Jones*, and almost entirely overlooked work in Moore's early career, but the chapter never quite explains why these three comics belong together or what they add up to. The third chapter is the most socially and historically engaged part of the book, as it addresses Moore's on-going discussion of what Di Liddo calls Englishness but might be more properly termed Britishness: the legacies of Empire and the Thatcher years. Thus, she makes the important point that these two eras within Moore's corpus and directly related in terms of the politics of domination and marginalisation, a very useful, critical connection, and a highly teachable one if one wanted to demonstrate the historicity of his work.

Finally, the last chapter talks exclusively about *Lost Girls*, at the time still a recent publication, in terms of pornography, and it returns to the chronotope, but the real point of discussing *Lost Girls* seems to be that it displays all of Moore's creative tricks in one, convenient volume. Teachers having trouble constructing a way to approach that challenging (and not altogether successful) book might find great use in Di Liddo's attempt to look at it as a coherent whole with a specific, conceptual core. The conclusion of *Comics as Performance* discusses the performance aspect of the book that last appeared in the introduction but does not significantly appear in the chapters. The concept seems as if it was important in constructing the whole text, but it does not actually come up all that often. Ultimately, it is simply not a necessary element of the book for the reader, though, because the individual chapters function quite well without it, which is why I contend that the book is more useful as a collection of individually interesting readings, albeit structured around a set of coherent themes, than as a fully integrated volume.

This description of Di Liddo's chapters should not be taken as damning with faint praise, however. The book is extremely useful to the Moore scholar; it contains a great number of individually coherent and fascinating analyses. It would be of particular use to a teacher working with Moore because it meticulously explains some of the more obscure elements of his work. Chapter 2's discussion of *From Hell* as "The Urban Chronotope," for example, describes the precise temporal play that *From Hell* engages in during Gull's murders, all culminating in the final murder and dissection in which Gull appears to travel through time to the 1980s (79-81). Teachers preparing lessons on *From Hell* can quite easily invert these methodical, detailed discussions in Di Liddo into questions to set in front of students: "When do Gull's visions occur, under what circumstances? What does he see and where does he go? How do the spaces that he visits reflect upon his highly patriarchal view of a cosmic order? What critique of that view does *From Hell* construct?"

That Di Liddo provides specific answers to these questions is useful, but that her work

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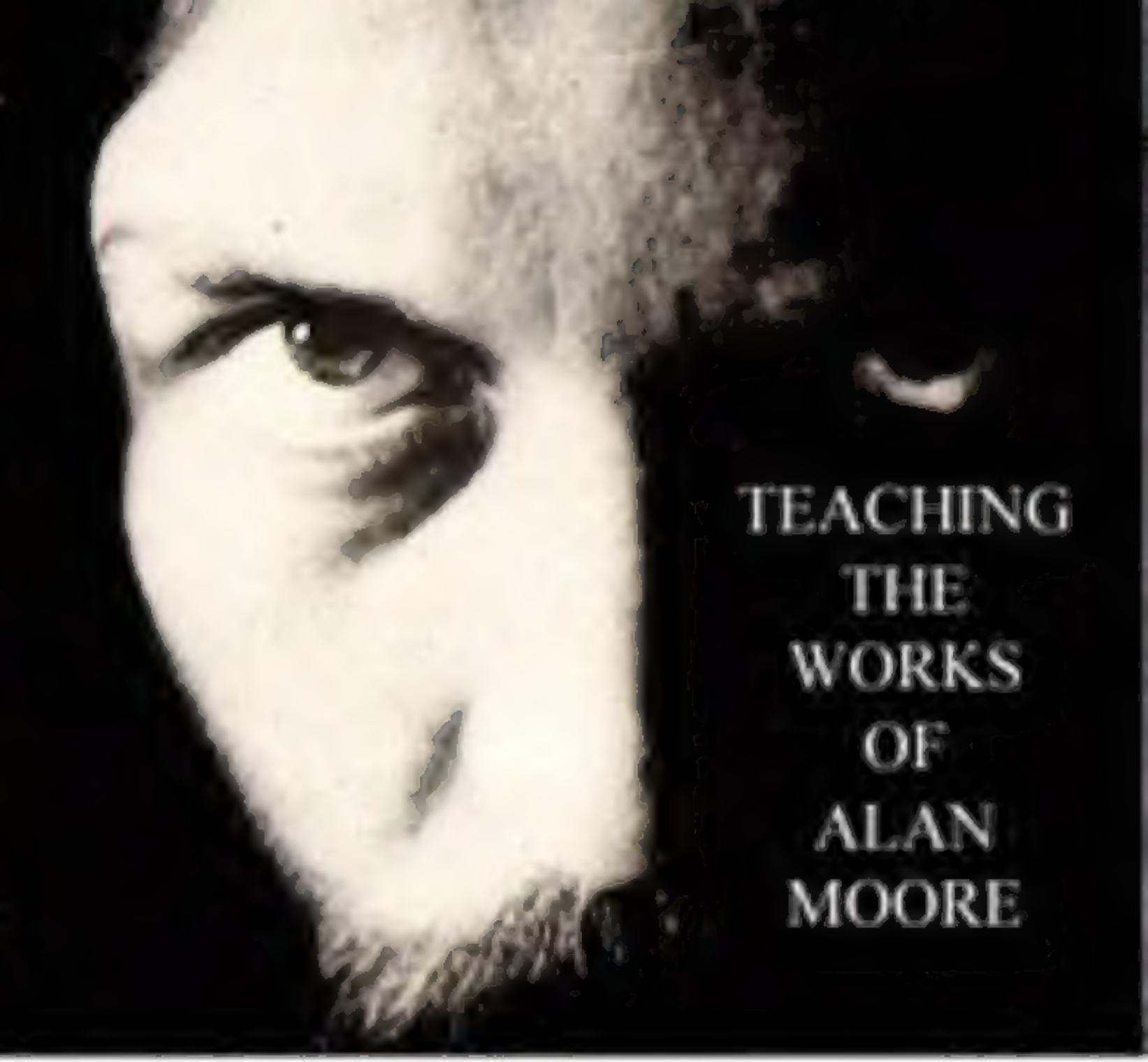
implies these questions is crucial to any discussion-based pedagogy in which taking the time to discuss these kinds of questions would be more valuable than having ready answers to them.



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